

Hiring & Retaining More Women: *The Advantages to Law Enforcement Agencies*

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a division of the Feminist Majority Foundation

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*"The time has come and the need pressing for the cooperation and heroic aide of women."
-San Francisco News Letter, November 30, 1895*

In 1968, the Indianapolis Police Department made history by assigning the first two female officers to patrol on an equal basis with their male colleagues.¹ Since that time, women have entered the field of law enforcement in increasing numbers and played a critical role in the development of modern policing. Yet the number of women in law enforcement has remained small and the pace of increase slow.

In 2001, women accounted for only 12.7% of all sworn law enforcement positions in large agencies, 8.1% in small and rural agencies,² and 14.4% in federal agencies.^{3 4} Although women gained an average of approximately half a percentage point per year within large police agencies from 1972 to 1999, there is mounting evidence that this trend has now stalled or even reversed. In 2000 and 2001, the representation of women in large police agencies actually declined from the year before -- from 14.3% in 1999 and 13.0% in 2000 to 12.7% in 2001.⁵ The message is clear: at the present rate, women will not achieve equality in large police agencies for several generations if at all. Clearly, barriers continue to exist for women in the field of law enforcement, and few agencies have specific strategies for increasing the number of women within their ranks.⁶

Law enforcement today is facing a crisis -- a loss of public confidence and trust in the wake of police corruption scandals that are unparalleled in recent history. Highly publicized incidents of excessive force and police corruption have generated shocking headlines -- Los Angeles, New York City, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, New Jersey, Washington DC, Seattle, Chicago, Riverside. Police brutality and corruption lawsuits are costing taxpayers millions of dollars each year, and their number and cost are only increasing.⁷ With payouts increasing, it will not be long before taxpayers revolt and demand accountability by police leaders and other public officials.

At the same time, police leaders and executives are under pressure to implement community or service oriented policing, transforming the very nature of the relationship between law enforcement and the communities they serve. Nationwide, communities are demanding a shift in focus from their law enforcement agencies, toward a more modern approach that emphasizes communication and cooperation with citizens as well as informal problem solving.

So what does all of this have to do with the question of hiring and retaining more women?

Research conducted both in the United States and internationally clearly demonstrates that women officers rely on a style of policing that uses less physical force, are better at defusing and de-escalating potentially violent confrontations with citizens, and are less likely to become involved in problems with use of excessive force. Additionally, women officers often possess better communication skills than their male counterparts and are better able to facilitate the cooperation and trust required to implement a community policing model. In an era of costly litigation, hiring and retaining more women in law enforcement is therefore likely to be an effective means of addressing the problems with excessive force and citizen complaints.

As an additional benefit, female officers often respond more effectively to incidents of violence against women, a crime that represents approximately half of all violent crime calls to police.⁸ Increasing the representation of women on the force is also likely to address another costly problem for police administrators -- the pervasive problem of sex discrimination and sexual harassment -- by changing the climate of modern law enforcement agencies. Finally, the very presence of women in the field will often bring about change in policies and procedures that benefit both male and female officers.

All of these factors can work to the advantage of those within the police profession as well as the communities they serve. We therefore begin this document with the research demonstrating that female officers are equally capable as their male counterparts, and go on to discuss the unique advantages that women offer to the contemporary field of law enforcement.

SIX ADVANTAGES FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES THAT HIRE AND RETAIN MORE WOMEN

1. Female officers are proven to be as competent as their male counterparts

A number of early evaluations were conducted to determine the effectiveness of male versus female officers, in law enforcement agencies such as Washington DC, St. Louis, New York City, Denver, Newton, Massachusetts, Philadelphia, California, and Pennsylvania. The results clearly indicated that men and women were equally capable of successful performance as patrol officers.⁹

Similar research conducted in other countries has reached the same conclusion,¹⁰ as do more recent efforts that find no meaningful difference between male and female officers in: their activities or productivity on patrol;¹¹ their commitment to law enforcement organizations;¹² their response to violent confrontations;¹³ their performance evaluations received both at the academy and on the job;¹⁴ their level of job satisfaction;¹⁵ and their participation in training and other professional development activities.¹⁶

In fact, some studies indicate areas of police performance in which women excel. This report will summarize the evidence that women officers tend to use a style of policing that relies more on communication than physical force, and that they are therefore more likely than their male counterparts to deescalate potentially violent situations and avoid excessive use of force. The research also suggests that female officers are more likely to have a community-oriented style of policing and that they are more effective at handling domestic violence incidents which constitute the largest single category of violent crime calls. Other research documents the advantages of women's greater education and superior management style within policing.

- In one study, female police executives were found to be more flexible, emotionally independent, self-assertive, self-confident, proactive, and creative than their male counterparts. Male police executives, on the other hand, were more authoritarian and prejudiced than the women studied.¹⁷
- Other research consistently demonstrates that women in law enforcement have more education than their male peers.¹⁸

The body of evidence thus clearly suggests that male and female police officers are equally capable to successfully meet the demands of the law enforcement profession. Joseph Balkin observed that "not all women are able to handle all police jobs -- but neither are all men." The fact is that "in some respects, at least, women are better suited for police work than men."¹⁹

2. Female officers are less likely to use excessive force.

"Police work used to be like a laborer's job...the only requirement was that you had to be tough. Now, that's not what we're looking for...[The job] is all about knowing how to talk to people. We screen for drug use, criminal background, but we don't do much screening for people who can get along with other people...A good cop knows how to defuse the situation by talking it out."²⁰

In this quote from the New York Times, Timothy Egan illustrates how a "good cop" uses communication skills in every aspect of the job and can often reduce the need for force by de-escalating potentially violent situations. By this criterion, women clearly make "good cops," as demonstrated in research both in the U.S. and internationally over the last 25 years.

- To date, there are a number of studies demonstrating that female officers utilize a less authoritarian style of policing that relies less on physical force -- despite similarities in activity and effectiveness.²¹
- Several research studies have documented that female officers are not reluctant to use force when necessary. That is, men and women are equally likely to use force during the course of routine professional duties.²²

Yet research unequivocally demonstrates that women are less likely to be involved in employing both deadly force²³ and excessive force.²⁴ Female officers are also substantially less likely than their male colleagues to be involved in fights or other "physical assaultiveness on the job."²⁵

For example, one recent study of seven major U.S. police departments indicated that female officers are named in only 5% of citizen complaints for excessive force and 2% of the sustained allegations of excessive force. Moreover, women officers in large agencies account for only 6% of the dollars paid out in court judgments and settlements in complaints for excessive force. When these figures are compared to the 12.7% representation of sworn women, they indicate that the average male officer on a big city police agency costs taxpayers somewhere between two-and-a-half and five-and-a-half times more than the average woman officer in excessive force liability lawsuit payouts. He is also over eight and a half times more likely to have an allegation of excessive force sustained against him, and he is two to three times more likely to have a citizen name him in a complaint of excessive force.²⁶

The question of physical strength and policing

Of course, the question of physical strength lies at the heart of the traditional reluctance to hire women into policing. A number of studies document that police officers and community members are both concerned that women are not strong enough or aggressive enough for police work.²⁷ Yet physical strength has not been shown to predict either general police effectiveness²⁸ or the ability to successfully handle dangerous situations.²⁹

- Based on the assumption that strength and agility are necessary for successful performance as a police officer, most agencies use some form of physical testing as part of their selection process. Yet studies consistently fail to support this basic premise.
- To illustrate, an early study of the California Highway Patrol indicated that neither general fitness measures nor "practical applications tests" predicted supervisor ratings on 16 critical job tasks. Yet the practical applications tests were subsequently adopted for selection.³⁰

The validity of physical testing is also undermined when a significant percentage of incumbent officers fail a test, when no evidence is provided to suggest that these officers were performing their duties unsatisfactorily.

- In one such study, 32% of the male and 84% of the female officers on one Canadian police department failed the test known as the Police Officer Physical Abilities Test (POPAT).³¹
- Two additional studies reported that 30-40% of incumbent officers failed each of several test events.³²
- In another example, 14% of the incumbents on the Austin Police Department failed the fitness test standards, although "no officer was rated in poor condition" on the physical conditioning item on the performance evaluation.³³

In fact, there are no documented cases of negative outcomes due to the lack of strength or aggression exhibited by a female officer.³⁴ Research documents that police officers are not generally killed in the line of duty because of physical weakness but "due to circumstances beyond their control, or as a result of poor judgment."³⁵ According to the National Law Enforcement Memorial Fund, the vast majority of police officer fatalities are caused by gunfire and automobile accidents. Physical strength does not play a primary role in these tragedies, nor does it explain why men are disproportionately more likely than women to be killed in the line of duty.³⁶

- For example, the detailed analysis of peace officer deaths in California between 1995 and 1999 revealed that all 33 felonious deaths were shootings and the primary factors involved were either tactical errors or an "unprovoked, sudden and deliberate attack."³⁷
- Physical strength also fails to predict the likelihood of assaults on officers.³⁸ Rather, analysis such as that conducted by California POST reveals that training is the primary factor in preventing the injury and death of officers.³⁹

Indeed, some have suggested that alternative characteristics might be preferable to physical strength, such as the ability to defuse potential violence⁴⁰ and maintain composure in situations of conflict.⁴¹

- Given that an estimated 80-90% of policing involves noncriminal or service functions,⁴² the emphasis in traditional policing on physical strength might actually serve as a liability to police departments seeking to successfully meet the demands of their community.
- In addition, physical agility tests "weed out" qualified women (and men) who could potentially implement an alternative model of policing that focuses less on physical force and more on interpersonal communication.⁴³

For example, a national survey of police agencies revealed that 89% utilized some form of physical agility testing for entry-level selection, but there was a striking lack of agreement regarding the physical capabilities that should be tested and the standards that should be used to evaluate successful performance. Equally important, these agencies had 31% fewer women than those that did not use such a physical test for entry-level selection.⁴⁴ Other research has also documented the negative impact on women's representation in those agencies that use a physical agility test as part of their selection process.⁴⁵

An emphasis on communication

In contrast, a shift away from the current emphasis on physical force is likely to capitalize on the interpersonal skills that female officers possess not only in equal measure to their male counterparts, but often to a greater degree. Perhaps for this reason, research has documented a preference among community members for female officers. Studies have shown that community members prefer female officers to respond to potentially dangerous situations⁴⁶ and believe they are better able to defuse these interactions.⁴⁷ Another study found that 93% of survey respondents strongly prefer officer teams with both a woman and a man.⁴⁸ Female officers also view themselves as using a style of policing that relies less on violence and more on communication.⁴⁹

- Unfortunately, these interpersonal skills have not traditionally been emphasized in selection standards and background investigations. For example, only 37% of the largest police departments require any college coursework for police applicants.⁵⁰ This figure contrasts dramatically with the 67-80% of city police departments and 84-91% of state police agencies that use physical agility testing as part of their selection process.⁵¹
- In fact, a history of perpetrating violence has often been ignored when screening potential candidates.⁵² It is therefore noteworthy that two studies have found a gender difference in physical aggression can be identified among job applicants. Both studies documented that male applicants for law enforcement jobs were more likely than female applicants to have previous involvement in physical fights. In one, men were more than twice as likely as women to have been involved in a fight during the past five years.⁵³ This is the type of behavior that should be screened during the selection process, and would likely result in hiring more women and fewer dangerous men.
- In today's environment of ever-increasing litigation, law enforcement agencies cannot afford to overlook any means of reducing their risk of excessive force in favor of a more service-oriented style of policing.⁵⁴

Research demonstrates that female officers not only exhibit more reasoned caution than their male counterparts, but also that they increase this tendency in their male partners.⁵⁵ By hiring and retaining more women, departments can thus go a long way toward transforming their focus to one that emphasizes interpersonal skills and cooperation with the community.

3. Female officers implement "community-oriented policing."

Community policing represents a new approach to modern law enforcement, emphasizing communication and cooperation with citizens as well as informal problem solving. It is therefore important to note that women officers receive more favorable evaluations and fewer citizen complaints than their male counterparts.⁵⁶

- To illustrate, one study found that male officers were the target of 50% more insults by citizens and almost three times as many threats or attempts at injury in comparison with their female peers.⁵⁷
- In another, police training instructors indicated that female officers have an advantage over their male peers in several areas, including empathy toward others and interacting in a way that is not designed to "prove" something.⁵⁸

For their part, female officers report greater support for the principles of community policing than their male colleagues⁵⁹ and are less cynical and more respectful in their view of citizens,⁶⁰ which is important because such an orientation is associated with a decreased likelihood of using excessive force.⁶¹ In fact, some have argued that police agencies who emphasize the use of force for crime control rather than a more community-oriented style of policing will be more likely to select officers with stereotypically masculine characteristics.⁶²

There is also evidence that women in law enforcement are less likely to be involved in various forms of misconduct.⁶³ It is no wonder, then, that some have suggested hiring more female officers as a way of improving the public image of the police department.⁶⁴ Several police agencies in Mexico and Latin America have even established a corps of women-only to handle traffic violations because they are less likely to accept bribes and engage in other forms of corruption.⁶⁵

4. More female officers will improve law enforcement's response to violence against women.

Research indicates that 2-3 million women are physically assaulted each year in the U.S. by their male partners.⁶⁶ In addition, the most recent national estimates indicate that 1 out of 6 American women will be sexually assaulted⁶⁷ and 1 out of 12 will be stalked⁶⁸ during their lifetime. Clearly, the extent of the problem highlights the critical importance of police response to crimes of violence against women.

- The cost of failure in this particular area is high, both in human and financial terms. For example, ineffective police response has been found to deter victims of domestic violence from reporting future assaults.⁶⁹
- Inappropriate response also adds to the risk of litigation, as departments are increasingly being held accountable for failing to properly handle domestic violence. This is especially true in cases where a protective order has been issued.⁷⁰
- Fortunately, the benefits of success are also substantial. For example, effective police response has been found to both improve the self-esteem of battered women⁷¹ and increase the likelihood that they will leave abusive relationships.⁷²

Because the police response to crimes of violence against women is so critical, it is worth noting that female officers have long been viewed as more effective in this area than their male counterparts.⁷³ This perception is shared by the community,⁷⁴ police training instructors,⁷⁵ and female officers themselves.⁷⁶ It is also supported by research.

- For example, a 1985 study found that female officers demonstrated more concern, patience, and understanding than their male colleagues when responding to calls of domestic violence.⁷⁷ Battered women who had contact with a female officer rated the police response as more helpful than those without such contact. They also rated the performance of female officers more favorably.
- In another more recent study with the DC Metropolitan Police Department, male officers were found to respond differently based on whether the victim was a first-time or "repeat" caller for crimes of domestic violence. When the responding officers were all men, first-time callers rated the police response more favorably and were more likely to have a police report written to document their abuse. However, all-male teams responding to victims who had previously called police received less favorable evaluations and were less likely to write a police report to document the incident. No such differences were seen when the responding officers included at least one woman.⁷⁸

Given that domestic violence accounts for approximately half of all violent crime calls made to police,⁷⁹ this ability is critically important to the success of contemporary law enforcement in responding to the needs of the community.⁸⁰

The problem of police officer domestic violence

Of course, it is insufficient to discuss the police response to violence against women without addressing the possibility that responding officers have committed these crimes themselves.

- Domestic violence has been documented in 40% of police families,⁸¹ in contrast with 10% of American families in the general population.⁸² Law enforcement agencies around the county are increasingly faced with the question of how to respond when these crimes are reported.⁸³
- For example, the Los Angeles Police Department saw 508 allegations of domestic violence and 533 allegations of sexual misconduct during a period of 22 months in 2001 and 2002, according to the Police Inspector General.
- Many have noted the traditional failure of police departments to respond effectively to officer-involved domestic violence and described the grim reality faced by victims.⁸⁴

To improve the situation, the International Association of Chiefs of Police recently issued a number of policy recommendations.⁸⁵ However, violence against women is vastly more likely to be committed by men rather than women,⁸⁶ so another obvious recommendation is to increase the number of female law enforcement professionals. Increasing women's numbers in the ranks of law enforcement also has the potential for lessening the chance that crimes of violence against women will be handled by an officer who has perpetrated such a crime.

5. Increasing the presence of female officers reduces problems of sex discrimination and harassment within a law enforcement agency.

Study after study documents that women in law enforcement continue to face a variety of obstacles, including negative attitudes, gender discrimination, and sexual harassment.

- Research consistently demonstrates that the negative attitude of male colleagues is one of the most significant problems experienced by female officers.⁸⁷
- Other work documents the widespread prevalence of gender discrimination, under-utilization of female officers, and sexual harassment.⁸⁸ For example, in studies as many as 68-86% of the female officers describe having experienced sexual harassment.⁸⁹

This climate of "widespread gender bias"⁹⁰ seen in contemporary police agencies has a number of deleterious effects, not the least of which is the negative impact on the retention and promotion of female officers.

- In general, women enter and remain in the policing profession for many of the same reasons that men do, including the desirable pay and benefits, the challenges associated with the job, desire for promotion, and the opportunity to help others.⁹¹
- However, they often leave for reasons that are very different, including unique stresses not faced by their male counterparts. Among these are problems with co-worker gossip, training, lack of promotional opportunity, inflexible working patterns, and administrative policies that disadvantage female officers.⁹²
- Women face the extra burden of having to "prove themselves" beyond what is expected of men, and they are often isolated from the networks that provide an officer with needed information, support, mentoring, and protection.⁹³ Women of color face additional difficulties based on the intersection of sexism and racism in police agencies.⁹⁴
- Other negative effects documented among female officers include decreased trust in their colleagues,⁹⁵ more physical consequences of stress,⁹⁶ and more indicators of burnout and greater intention to quit.⁹⁷
- One of the most prominent impacts however, deals with the lack of promotional opportunities. Male and female officers report the same desire for promotion,⁹⁸ yet these opportunities are seen as less available to women in comparison with their male counterparts.⁹⁹ This is likely to be part of the explanation for the higher turnover rate that is consistently seen among female officers, both at the academy and on the job.¹⁰⁰

Extensive research also reveals that sexual harassment is much more likely to occur in male-dominated workplaces and in fields that have been traditionally considered masculine.¹⁰¹

- Hiring and retaining more women within a law enforcement agency will obviously reduce the exposure to liability in this area by simply reducing the numeric under-representation of female officers.

However, the increased representation of women can also have the benefit of transforming the very climate within a law enforcement agency, and reducing the prevalence of gender

discrimination, under-utilization, and sexual harassment.¹⁰² For example, at least one study has found that some of the problems with tokenism experienced by female officers are particularly pronounced in departments with a smaller representation of sworn women.¹⁰³

6. The presence of women can bring about beneficial changes in policy for all officers.

Lewis Sherman envisioned as early as 1973 that police departments would be held liable for their under-representation of female officers, and that hiring more women would not only bring them into compliance with the U.S. Constitution but also yield improvements in the procedures for selection, recruitment, and retention of all sworn personnel. As he argued:

"If a woman 5 feet, 3 inches tall can perform the job of patrol, why not a man who is the same height? If a woman needs better physical defense training, might not also a man? If a woman defuses a violent situation without having to make an arrest, shouldn't she or any man who does the same be given a high rating for effective law enforcement performance? Departments could move toward making their selection and training standards job-related, as well as toward development of new measures of police performance."¹⁰⁴

Improvements such as these would inevitably benefit both female and male employees within law enforcement. The Police Foundation similarly noted in 1974 that:

"The introduction of women will create an incentive...to examine many management practices which are less acceptable now that they must be applied to men and women alike. This may result in the development of improved selection criteria, performance standards, and supervision for all officers."¹⁰⁵

They further concluded that the expanded supply of police personnel, the reduced cost of recruiting, and better community representation were additional benefits of hiring of more female officers.

CONCLUSION

Given the many difficult challenges facing modern police agencies, the advantages for hiring more women have never been more clear. However at the current rate of hiring, it is inevitable that women will remain only "tokens" within law enforcement unless the traditional policies and practices that keep out qualified women are changed substantially.

The good news is that changes in policies can have a dramatic impact on the recruitment and retention of women police officers.

- For example, when the Albuquerque Police Department instituted a range of policies under the "New Workplace Project" funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, the percentage of female recruits increased from 10 to 25%, and they were retained at the same rate as their male counterparts.¹⁰⁶
- Similarly, the Tucson Police Department increased their percentage of female recruits from 10 to 29% by implementing active strategies to retain women. Furthermore, clear initiatives to address sexual harassment better prepared officers to prevent or stop such behavior.¹⁰⁷

Clearly, leadership in this area matters. In one national study, increases in the number of women were more likely to be seen in police agencies whose chief placed a high priority on recruiting female officers.¹⁰⁸ Lawsuits and consent decrees are also a valuable tool for increasing women's representation in sworn law enforcement. In another study of 31 police agencies that had been under a consent decree to increase the hiring and/or promotion of women, analysis revealed that the consent decree did have a dramatic and positive impact both on the representation of sworn women and their pace of increase.

- For each type of law enforcement agency (city, county, state), the pattern of results was identical. The representation of sworn women in agencies with a consent decree was substantially higher than the percentage in agencies without a consent decree -- and higher than the national average for that type of agency in 2001. For example, municipal police departments with a consent decree had 17.8% sworn women, which is 77% higher than those without a consent decree (10.1%) and 25% higher than the national average (14.2%). The same pattern of results was seen for county and state police agencies.¹⁰⁹
- In the same study, the pace of increase in women's representation was also twice as fast when a consent decree was in effect. Surveyed agencies increased women's representation by an average of 0.5% per year when they were under a consent decree. After the consent decree expired, they continued to make progress in women's representation but the average annual increase slowed to only 0.2%

Based on both research and practical experience, there is every reason to believe that increasing women's representation among sworn law enforcement will yield benefits not only to women within the police profession, but also to their male counterparts, the larger police organization, and the communities in which they serve.

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The National Center for Women & Policing, a division of the Feminist Majority Foundation, works to increase the numbers of women in policing and address issues of police reform nationally. For more information, see www.womenandpolicing.org.

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