What Works: The Social Science Research Behind Advancing Women in Policing

RETENTION & CULTURE

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About

The 30x30 Initiative is a coalition of police leaders, researchers, and professional organizations who have joined together to advance the representation and experiences of women in policing agencies across the United States.

The Initiative is based on the importance of achieving at least 30% representation to empower a group to influence an organization’s culture. This 30% threshold is where change begins to happen, but it is not our end goal. 30x30 is working with policing agencies to improve recruiting practices and establish community partnerships so that agencies become truly representative of the jurisdictions they serve. While 30x30 is focused on advancing women in policing, these principles are applicable to all demographic diversity, not just gender.

Our ultimate goal is to increase the representation of women in police recruit classes to 30% by 2030, and to ensure police policies and culture intentionally support the success of qualified women officers throughout their careers.

Currently, women make up only 12% of sworn officers and 3% of police leadership in the U.S. This under-representation of women in policing undermines public safety. Research shows women officers use force less, and use less excessive force; achieve better outcomes for crime victims, especially in sexual assault cases; are perceived by communities as being more honest and compassionate, and make fewer discretionary arrests.

What Works

showcases the social science on which the 30x30 Initiative is built.

This collection is one of many resources and summaries of the latest research on the experiences of women in policing, including concrete, evidence-informed steps that agencies can take to address the barriers that hold women back at every stage of their careers.

We are grateful to the following individuals whose work made this compilation possible, and to every participating agency who has pledged to advance women in policing.

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INCREASING GENDER DIVERSITY

has significant implications for improving the culture of organizations to be more supportive of workers’ different identities. It is important that women have equal opportunity to become officers and this goal can be measured, in part, by comparing the numbers of women officers and men officers who respond to recruitment efforts. However, it is just as important that women receive equal opportunities and treatment throughout their careers as officers. This paper synthesizes the current research on retention and culture, and the obstacles to retention for women and other minority officers in police departments in the United States and abroad. This helps shed light on women’s experiences within police departments and the unique pressures they face, which may explain some of their decisions to leave their departments or the profession. This paper should serve as a resource for police leadership who want to increase gender parity in their departments by retaining more women officers and creating a more inclusive, respectful environment.

This paper explores the factors that influence and impact retention and culture for women officers in police departments. To increase gender diversity among police, departments must understand the experiences of women officers and some of their main concerns about the quality of the work environment and their decisions to progress in or leave their departments. Meanwhile, increasing the retention rates of women officers allows them to have a greater impact on department culture, thereby potentially improving retention rates of newer women officers who would feel less isolated in the workplace because of their gender. The positive retention of women is important for other reasons as well; high retention rates signify a healthy workplace environment and they make departments more economically efficient.

1 Bradbury and Kellough “Representative Bureaucracy: Exploring the Potential for Active Representation in Local Government.” Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory 18, no. 4 (2008);
2 Choi, et al “Does Increasing Gender Representativeness and Diversity Improve Organizational Integrity?” Public Personnel Management 47, no. 1 (2017);
3 Centola, et al “Experimental evidence for tipping points in social convention.” Science 360 (2018);
4 Lonsway Hiring & Retaining More Women: The Advantages to Law Enforcement Agencies. Educational Resources Information Center (2000);
5 Schuck “Female Officers and Community Policing: Examining the Connection between Gender Diversity and Organizational Change.” Women & Criminal Justice 27, no. 5 (2017).
KEY FINDINGS

Using approximately 30 scholarly sources related to this area of policing, this paper presents and elaborates on three key findings that can explain why many women officers decide to leave departments:

**Gender discrimination is a problem in police departments and it often influences women officers’ decision to leave.**

Women officers report feeling a lack of organizational support in various areas including: promotional opportunities, family or maternity-leave policies, and redress for discrimination or harassment.

**Policing being male-dominated influences the culture and values of departments, which is an underlying source of the previous obstacles to women officers’ retention.**

The following sections will further explain these key findings and present a few suggested actions departments can take to address the cultural and organizational sources of the obstacles to retention, based on the findings and suggested by the literature.
Departments must recognize the influence of male-dominant culture on organizational values and obstacles to retaining women.

Nearly all studies concerning the experiences and sources of retention for women and minority officers discuss department culture as a significant influence on officers' perception of the quality of their work. The demographic makeup of departments has an influence on the culture of departments. Policing is a traditionally male-dominated profession and even today, white, heterosexual men comprise the majority of law enforcement. Agency culture contributes to discrimination against minority officers in personal and departmental practices. For example, studies of LGBTQ officers in cities in the U.S. Midwest and Southwest found that officers' level of willingness to come out, and resulting discriminatory experiences, were connected to a culture of homophobia present in certain departments. Homophobia present in certain departments resulted in a negative view among those LGBTQ officers of department culture overall.

The demographic makeup of departments can also have significant impacts on the policy decisions of those departments. For example, the predominance of men officers may negatively influence the existence and quality of maternity leave-related policies in departments, which are essential for women officers to feel secure, supported and able to return to their duties and profession. Studies also have shown that employment of more women, who experience higher levels of stress than male counterparts with comparable parental or marital statuses, can influence the formalization of more maternity and pregnancy-related policies.

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Culture

Several studies suggested some officers find it difficult to be accepted even when they attempt to assimilate within existing department culture. Officers reported feeling it was necessary to emulate the characteristics and behaviors of dominant racial and gender groups within their departments in order to fit into the department. Studies of sexual and racial minority officers found that many of them attempt to conform to the dominant groups, whether it is by performative heterosexuality or masculinity within departments. Meanwhile, an interview-based study of women officers in a large, metropolitan police department with a strict haircut policy found that many of the women affected felt that the policy meant they lost control over the expression of their own gender.

Moreover, certain cultural aspects of law enforcement have directly contributed to lower retention rates overall. For example, a survey of over 100 officers who resigned within the first 16 months of their policing careers found that one of the main reasons related to the unexpected cultural aspects of the job. Many officers reported feeling uncomfortable with the paramilitary or aggressive aspects that they felt were valued by their peers and supervisors.

As previously alluded to, while culture is a source of decreased retention for women officers, high retention of women officers is simultaneously part of the solution. Studies have found that the more representation of certain demographics there is within a group, the greater influence this demographic can have on policies. Male dominance has influenced police culture, but by increasing the percentage of women officers in departments at all levels, the culture and policies can be more equally influenced by both genders, and possibly improved.

10 Miller et al. 2003; Hassell & Brandl 2009.
Departments must uproot gender-based discrimination which influences women officers’ decisions to resign.

Many studies have found that gender-based discrimination – as well as discrimination based on sexual orientation, race, etc. – affects many women officers, in several ways. Women report experiencing sexual harassment, other offensive commentary, and generally unwanted attention from other male officers.¹⁴

Moreover, a few studies of police disciplinary processes have found that in certain departments women officers have been disproportionately disciplined compared to their male counterparts.¹⁵ For example, a 2021 review of secondary data concerning officers from the NYPD found that a greater percentage of women officers were removed by their supervisors compared to men officers despite the fact that women officers are less represented as a whole within departments. The study also found that women officers were more likely to be removed for comparatively lower-level offenses than men, with women being removed mostly for administrative offenses and men removed for criminal or serious misconduct.¹⁶

Additionally, many women officers deal with sexual harassment within their departments from colleagues or supervisors. Research has consistently found that sexual harassment is a unique problem that women officers face, and it has often been cited as a source of stress for women officers.¹⁷ One study involving a national sample of women officers found that over 93% of respondents reported experiencing sexual harassment at some point during their career.¹⁸

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¹⁶ Gaub & Holtfreter 2021
Many of these officers may feel uncomfortable reporting their experiences of sexual harassment to their supervisors in a majority-male agency, which, despite reporting mechanisms and policies, allows those actions to go on unaddressed and unpunished.\(^\text{19}\)

It is important to mention that discrimination, harassment, and the impacts of these issues compound on officers of multiple minority identities. Studies have found that women officers of color, for example, face further discrimination than white women officers, both for their race and gender.\(^\text{20}\) Additionally, researchers have focused on the different relationships white women officers have with their white male counterparts compared to those that Black or other non-white women officers have, and suggested that Black women officers are more likely to be viewed as outsiders and discriminated against.\(^\text{21}\) Finally, studies suggest racial disparities in three major urban police departments with respect to disciplinary action taken by supervisors even when there are no racial differences in the number of allegations of misconduct between white and non-white officers.\(^\text{22}\)

Departments must deliberately construct support and opportunities for women officers.

The other important factor that research shows influences women officers’ decision to leave law enforcement is the lack of organizational support or opportunities for advancement.\(^\text{23}\) One type of support lacking in some departments is adequate family and parental leave policies. Officers with marital or familial obligations usually have higher stress levels than single officers, one study found, and much of this stress can be attributed to conflicting work and home obligations.\(^\text{24}\)

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Departments’ decisions to implement and require family and parental leave can have positive effects on the stress levels and retention rates of these officers. In fact, the largest U.S. law enforcement agencies with the greatest women representation have formalized maternity and family leave policies for their employees.\(^{25}\)

Additionally, policies that accommodate pregnant women officers are important. Some of the regular tasks assigned to officers may be hard for them to accomplish when pregnant, so light-duty accommodations are important for pregnant officers to be able to keep their jobs and stay healthy. However, a study of administrators’ attitudes towards light-duty policies determined that these types of policies are not consistently implemented or enforced in departments across the United States which can add unhealthy stress for working pregnant officers.\(^{26}\)

There is evidence of barriers to promotional opportunities for women officers. A study of female officers in a large Midwestern police department suggested that many women officers do not seek promotional opportunities because of family responsibilities or because of romantic relationships with other officers.\(^{27}\) Moreover, interviews with women officers in the study found that many of them were concerned about negative attitudes from their colleagues with respect to them taking on leadership roles within their departments.\(^{28}\)

On the other hand, a few interview-based studies of women officers found that certain women officers are not comfortable applying for higher-ranking positions because they believe they are only being considered based on their gender.\(^{29}\) Others also were reported to question their competence more often than men officers when considering seeking promotions.\(^{30}\)
Department culture and ability to retain women officers are inextricably linked. The following are relevant items from the 30x30 Pledge aimed at growing a culture of inclusivity, meeting women’s distinct health and employment needs, and ensuring policing is a profession where women officers are able to thrive.

**FROM THE 30X30 PLEDGE**

**What Works:**

**Retention & Culture**

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**Essential**

- Review voluntary separation data. If the number of women officers voluntarily leaving the department is proportionally greater than men (as compared to the gender breakdown of the department), this could indicate gender-relevant issues in the department.

- Track completion rates for sexual harassment and related training, and take action necessary to achieve 100% completion rates. If you do not have such training, implement it.

**Strongly Recommended**

- Begin (or continue) to conduct exit interviews with all officers voluntarily separating from the department (including through retirement). Analyze responses for insights and trends, especially across genders.

- Review harassment case data. If the proportion of complaints filed by women is proportionally greater than men (as compared to the gender breakdown of the department), or if the proportion of unsubstantiated claims is higher for women than men this could indicate gender-relevant issues in the department. Note: Formal complaints only tell a part of the story. Be sure to include relevant questions regarding harassment and the complaint process in your survey and focus groups.

- Review your reporting processes for sexual and other harassment. Ensure they meet best practices, particularly with regards to enforcement, accountability, and conflicts of interest.

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What Works: Retention & Culture

FROM THE 30X30 PLEDGE

- Review your reporting processes for sexual and other harassment. Ensure they meet best practices, particularly with regards to enforcement, accountability, and conflicts of interest.

**Recommended**

- Conduct focus groups with a representative sample of officers to learn their concerns, priorities, and perspectives on culture, parity, and opportunity within the department. Also, consider including civilian employees in your sample to understand their perspective and how it may differ from sworn officers.

- Review the narratives of substantiated and unsubstantiated claims of sexual and other harassment. If the number of complaints is considerably large, reviewing a representative sample of complaints is acceptable. Try to identify themes and trends across demographics.

- Review discipline and commendation data. Are there significant differences across demographic groups, especially gender? If yes, the under or over-representation of a demographic group may indicate latent or overt bias in the system.

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Bibliography


