

‘There’s a little girl somewhere watching us who wants to be a police officer’: Strategies to attract more women into policing

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the research was to examine challenges women face in policing that may serve as barriers to the recruitment of other women; identifying challenges is crucial for developing strategies that attract women to the profession. The study employed in-depth, qualitative interviews with 16 policewomen. Emergent themes suggest six initiatives that could aid in recruiting more women: (1) Create recruitment materials that highlight roles that are not gender specific; (2) Provide fitness guidance to alleviate fears of inadequacy; (3) Organize mentorships that engage women interested in the profession; (4) Ensure representation of women in leadership roles; (5) Ensure that leaders identify and address inequities immediately to foster belonging; and (6) Institute family-friendly accommodations that allow recruits to balance work and home life. The officers interviewed reported finding purpose in policing, but they recognized the need to attract women in a concerted effort. Nationwide police departments are challenged to recruit women. Creating images, opportunities, and environments that demonstrate appreciation for women in the profession may aid in recruitment.

The [National Institute of Justice \(2019\)](#) questioned why the representation of women in law enforcement has remained stagnant. Less than 14% of law enforcement officers in the USA are women and growth has been limited ([Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Reporting Statistics, 2023](#)). Acknowledging the benefits of women in the profession, the 30 × 30 Initiative requests agency commitments that 30% of recruits will be women by 2030. Women in policing receive fewer complaints, potentially saving departments from litigation ([Porter and Prenzler, 2017](#); [Schuck and Rabe-Hemp, 2016](#)). Women are well regarded in the community ([Black and Kari, 2010](#); [Schuck, 2017](#)), are effective in providing support to crime victims, make fewer discretionary arrests and use less force ([Ba et al., 2021](#); [Bloom and Labovich, 2021](#); [Morin and Mercer, 2017](#); [Rabe-Hemp, 2008a](#); [Schuck and Rabe-Hemp, 2005](#)). With increasing recognition that women are assets in law enforcement, agencies seek to attract a more representative force, but stagnant growth is indicative of recruitment challenges.

The [National Center for Women and Policing \(2000\)](#) offered strategies to recruit more women over two decades ago that remain pertinent today: highlight community policing, be transparent with testing requirements, assess the hiring process for potential gender bias, develop mentoring programmes, and offer family-friendly policies. Likewise, [Whetstone et al. \(2006\)](#) found the most successful recruitment strategies included uti-

lizing websites and online applications, visiting career fairs, and visiting college campuses, respectively; these strategies continue today. [Whetstone et al.](#) did suggest not limiting pitches to criminal justice majors in order to get a more diverse pool, but outreach to women who have not already declared an interest in the profession remains challenging.

The messaging to potential recruits needs to be focussed if attracting women is a priority. [Silvestri \(2017\)](#) posited that the constructed image of the hyper-masculine crime fighter fosters the notion that women are unsuitable. In actuality, helping others is a primary motivating factor for people, especially women, to pursue a career in policing ([Clinkinbeard et al., 2021](#); [Gibbs, 2019](#); [Raganella and White, 2004](#)). [Schuck \(2021\)](#) found that emphasizing humanitarian benefits could aid in recruiting and retaining women and minority candidates. Additionally, messaging needs to ensure women that they are wanted. [Lord and Friday \(2003\)](#) suggested messaging that ensures women already have needed competencies ‘to think, analyze, listen, and communicate’ (p. 76). Furthermore, if policewomen are finding acceptance within improved organizational cultures ([Rabe-Hemp, 2008b](#)), recruitment materials could and should effectively challenge notions of not fitting into a male-dominated profession.

Recruitment materials should be transparent about the vetting process and required performance standards. The [National Center for Women and Policing \(2000\)](#) suggested that

interviews, psychological screenings, and fitness testing ‘need to be adjusted to assess the skills and abilities required of today’s law enforcement professional’ (p. 63), arguing fitness standards may not effectively predict job performance and may eliminate well-qualified women. Agencies that mandate physical agility testing have significantly fewer sworn women officers (Lonsway, 2003; Schuck, 2014). Bissett *et al.* (2012) found support among police officers for mandatory fitness testing for recruits but most did not favour similar testing of incumbents; physical agility and fitness were ranked at the bottom of competencies essential for effective policing. Bissett *et al.* recommended critically examining fitness standards to ensure relationship with job skills. They also suggested health-based screenings that account for gender and age, which may be better predictors of overall health and performance. While strict physical requirements may discourage some women, Schuck (2014) found that agencies that required higher education had greater representation of women; this calls into question what attributes are most essential for effective policing.

Diaz and Nuño (2021) surveyed criminal justice majors; female respondents who felt the most physically capable were most likely to pursue the career. Todak (2017) also surveyed college students planning careers in law enforcement and found women respondents made more serious efforts to prepare. They attended informational sessions, developed skills in self-defense, and worked in policing as interns. Experiential opportunities foster realistic expectations and encourage applying. Lonsway (2006) noted that women in policing do not report career barriers, but the ongoing need for women to *prove* themselves persists; receiving mentorship may alleviate self-doubt. Gibbs *et al.* (2020) recommended networking events to reduce social distance between potential applicants and the police. Surveyed respondents were more likely to consider policing if they knew an officer by name. Whetstone *et al.* (2006) contended that mentorships foster commitment to the values of the agency, which, in turn, improves recruitment and retention.

Gibbs (2021) argued that having women in leadership is essential for attracting women; additionally, ensuring that exceptional candidates are mentored on a path of advancement will enhance recruitment and minimize attrition. Women in leadership roles may aid in recruiting other women, but many agencies lack such representation. Garcia (2003) argued gendered norms of providing care to women and children historically helped women enter policing, but norms have persisted, resulting in limited advancement. Zempi (2020) interviewed officers in an English police force and the women reported existing discrimination prevented advancement. Archbold and Schulz (2012) posited that gender differences may be minimized as more women enter the profession, but attracting women without having female mentors poses challenges. Silvestri *et al.* (2013) suggested that in the hierarchical system, working for years at low ranks usually precedes qualifying for promotion; retaining young professionals is challenged, especially when other careers offer quicker advancement. To foster representation, the structure needs changing, but women who benefit from a perceived fast-track face opposition. Nonetheless, a system allowing multipoint entry into specializations and leadership roles may ‘serve to loosen the stronghold that men have’ (p. 69).

It is imperative that recruitment messaging convey a sense of inclusivity for women in law enforcement. Clinkinbeard *et al.* (2020) found that college students who rated themselves more masculine were more likely to consider policing as a profession. Cambareri and Kuhns (2018) found that female college students were less inclined to see policing as a sign of success and feared not being respected. Messaging must counteract perceptions of inadequacy when, in fact, women possess valued skills.

Research suggests that women may have communication skills essential in de-escalating volatile situations (Lichtenberg, 2019; Martin, 1999; Rabe-Hemp, 2008a; Seklecki and Paynich, 2007; Spillar, 2017; Todak, 2017). These exceptional skills, however, may pigeon-hole officers into lower-status roles. Women are frequently relegated to gendered tasks such as supporting women and children. Hill *et al.* (2022) surveyed women in law enforcement and found their limited representation in certain special units. When women are in special units, the units tend to foster gendered norms; thus, women are pigeon-holed as detectives, crisis negotiators, and civil disturbance officers. Researchers question whether police legitimacy could be enhanced by promoting community policing and relationship building involving all officers (Carrington *et al.*, 2021; Friedman, 2021).

Rief and Clinkinbeard (2020) surveyed officers on perceptions of women fitting in and concluded that gender may now have little influence over organizational structures; however, if women experience disrespect, it negatively impacts the work culture. The National Center for Women and Policing (2000) posited that academies may require ‘unquestioning adherence to rules’ (p. 83) and firearms familiarity, both of which may be foreign to women. If women sense a lack of fit, joining or persisting is unlikely.

Koepfel *et al.* (2022) identified strategies to recruit women for fire-fighting that included planting the seeds of enlisting early, mentoring women recruits, and supporting family leave and reproductive health. Recruiting and retaining qualified women requires a workplace culture that values work–life balance. Kurtz (2012) found that women officers, more so than their male counterparts, experience familial stressors that challenge recruitment and retention. Todak (2017) interviewed college students considering policing and women expressed concern about balancing family and work responsibilities. The National Institute of Justice (2019) demonstrated that shift work disadvantages women, especially those with families. Family-friendly policies such as paid parental leave and day care provisions may entice women. To recruit women, the military has offered sabbaticals and paid parental leave to raise children, updated gear to better fit women, addressed inequities and harassment, and conducted climate surveys—such measures should be adopted in policing (p. 18). The National Center for Women and Policing (2000) posited that live-in academies place burdens on mothers. Corder and Corder (2011) argued that recruitment practices and academies are not woman-friendly and may discourage applicants. Without offering family-friendly incentives, re-evaluating physical standards, challenging male-dominated work cultures, and providing paths for advancement, recruiting and retaining women may continue to be challenging.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

We sought to expand the limited scope of prior research concerning rewards and challenges that women experience and design recruitment strategies that dispel myths of not belonging, highlight benefits of service, and address barriers that discourage applications. By exploring women's motivations for joining and remaining in policing, and the challenges faced in a male-dominated profession, we sought to offer strategies for departments to become more inclusive, for recruitment messaging to be more gender balanced, and for proactive outreach to women.

METHODS

We conducted in-depth, virtual interviews with 16 women in policing. After securing IRB approval, we contacted each woman and sent an informed consent form and a demographic questionnaire to complete before the interview.

Participants

The 16 participants included 8 (50%) patrol officers, 2 (12.5%) troopers, 2 (12.5%) investigators, 3 (18.8%) sergeants, and 1 (6.2%) lieutenant who had worked in policing for an average of 12.6 years (range 1–30 years). They were mostly from the Northeast (75%) and worked in agencies that varied in size from 20 to 50 employees to metropolitan agencies of over 30,000. Most of the women were in their 30s (43.8%) or 40s (25.0%) while three (18.8%) were in their 20s and two (12.5%) were in their 50s. The majority were White (68.8%) but two (12.5%) identified as Black and three (18.8%) chose the 'some other race' category and wrote in Hispanic or Latina/o. All participants had at least some college; eight (50.0%) had a bachelor's degree, and five (31.3%) had a graduate degree. The majority (68.8%) studied criminal justice in college. Half worked a fixed shift (50.0%) and half worked a rotating shift (50.0%). Most were either married (43.8%) or never married (43.8%) and over half (56.3%) had children in their home.

Data collection

To obtain our sample, a few known officers welcomed the opportunity to participate; if a researcher knew a respondent, the other researcher conducted the interview. Furthermore, we reached out to organizers for the 30 × 30 Initiative and TacMobility and secured additional participants. These women encouraged others to participate, so we acquired the sample partially via snowball sampling.

Utilizing virtual platforms for interviewing is now commonplace, and we made every effort to protect confidentiality with Zoom videoconferencing technology. Archibald *et al.* (2019) examined practitioners' perceptions of the use of Zoom for research and found while some reported call quality issues, the benefits of convenience and establishing rapport outweighed minor glitches. We provided each respondent a private meeting code, and 'waiting rooms' ensured control over admittance. Meetings were recorded, and audio recordings were saved until transcriptions were verified for accuracy; thus, prior to recording, participants were invited to turn off cameras and remove

any identifiers on the screens. Any unsolicited identifiers were redacted from transcripts. The open-ended questions explored challenges as women in policing, perceptions of the ways the profession benefits by having women, and personal paths that led respondents to the profession. (See Appendix for interview questions).

Analysis

We realized achieved saturation as we were interviewing. Utilizing a guide for conducting thematic analysis (Nowell *et al.*, 2017), the two of us became familiar with the textual data by being present for all interviews and then by independently reviewing all recordings and transcripts multiple times, first for accuracy and then for reflexive note-taking. After establishing a coding framework, the two researchers independently reviewed transcripts again and organized textual data. Regular meetings throughout the coding process allowed for the discussion of challenges and the resolving of any discrepancies. The themes centred around challenges women faced (e.g. lack of representation, fitness requirements, and balancing work and home life) and evolved into six strategies that might address those challenges, thereby attracting more women to policing:

1. Create recruitment materials that highlight the variety of roles that are neither gender specific nor exclusionary.
2. Assess current fitness requirements and provide pre-academy fitness guidance to alleviate fears of inadequacy.
3. Organize mentorships that engage women who may consider serving or who are new to the profession.
4. Ensure representation of women in leadership roles.
5. Ensure that leaders address inequities immediately to foster belonging and prevent pigeon-holing.
6. Institute accommodations that allow recruits to balance work and home life.

RESULTS

The content analysis focussed on what drew these women to policing and the challenges faced that might deter others from joining the ranks.

Recruitment materials and messaging

The creation of recruiting materials and departmental imagery should become more reflective of community policing. Respondents unanimously value the support they provide citizens.

R16: I get to help people. . . I've always had this need to be in service to others.

R3: If you're here for the right reasons, and you want to do the job, and you have a good heart, then that's what policing needs right now.

To attract more women, recruitment materials should embrace and promote the mission of being in service to others. Respondents highlighted a desire to make positive change in their communities and to the profession.

R6: It was good to get back to the community, taking all those dealers off the street, taking all that product off the street. It was very self-gratifying.

The policewomen spoke of the importance of establishing connections within the community so they have allies to challenge the negative media representations that foster distrust and fear. Recruiting for skills that include effective communication and relationship building may bolster interest and future effectiveness as trusted community leaders.

R11: I've always been a huge supporter of community policing. . . If you have a good relationship with your community. . . you probably are in a better spot than if you had no relationship with your community. So things like "Coffee with a Cop" or "Shopping with a Cop". . . this is where we're heading, and I think that it's so important to have. . . a good relationship with community leaders, like a pastor at a church. . . that the community respects. If you have a good relationship with that person, they're the ones that can speak to their community to help deescalate a situation.

R12: I love community policing. . . Get out there. Talk to your communities. Let them know who you are. And then that way they're not afraid when you show up at their house and you don't have these crazy interactions where they've never met a police officer, and now you're in a weird spot because they're scared of what they see on the news.

Respondents suggested that to attract women, messaging needs to demonstrate they belong in policing. Depicting women in policing roles traditionally associated with male officers, including in positions of leadership, can promote an image of a growth-driven, rewarding career.

R14: I think there's a need for everybody to be represented because we should represent the population that we serve. . . that's how we're ultimately going to be able to make it a better world.

R5: The biggest challenges? I think, trying to get other women to do this job, too. Trying to make it. . . appealing. . . Just trying to get more women to know and understand that they can do this job, you know? Whether you're a single mom, whether you're married, whether you don't have kids. . .

Imagery in recruitment resources needs to reflect gender equality. Some of the women officers reported actively challenging gender role expectations, such as having only women counsel victims. With messaging that encourages women officers to take on traditionally male roles (e.g. K9 Officer, SWAT Officer, Defensive Tactics, and Firearms Instructor), women can begin to envision belonging. It is also critical to provide imagery of women in the highest ranking positions of an agency to propagate career advancement. Messaging that depicts males serving communities is equally important. Respondents' rationales for joining the force, including helping others and the desire to make change, are not gender-specific sentiments.

R9: I think that officers, in general, regardless of gender, given the appropriate training, and with the appropriate temperament, they could both do the same job well.

R8: Any gender can be suited to be a police officer. It doesn't just need to be a female who would be better in certain ways or a guy who would be better in certain other ways. I think both are equally beneficial for the job.

Images need to be realistic to challenge negative media imagery. Policing garners the most media attention when use of force or violence is the focus. Rarely is policing given attention when the far more common scenarios involving public service and lifesaving occur. Recruitment materials that depict daily job functions and police-community interactions create more realistic impressions for potential recruits. Participants suggested citizens are impacted by negative media imagery, which leads to unwarranted fear and distrust.

R1: I have had people cry on traffic stops begging me not to kill them. . . I have been accused of being a murderer over and over again by people who are terrified.

R11: . . . after George Floyd things were a lot different. The way that we were being treated was a lot different. It was basically like, "Well, you wear this uniform so you must be like all of these bad cops that we see in the news."

R12: I went and did my neighbor's granddaughter's brownie meeting the other night and I got to meet all these little kids and give them trooper stickers. . . I like putting a positive face to it because I think my biggest fear is that a little kid is scared of us and won't ask for help.

Positive imagery and messaging can not only help recruit community members into the profession but can remind citizens that the true mission of policing is to protect and serve.

R4: We did this career and joined the profession because we wanted to be able to do something. . . it's cliché, but we wanted to make a difference and we wanted to help people. . . I think people have forgotten.

Fitness guidance to alleviate uncertainty

Interviewees overwhelmingly shared that the physical aspects of the job caused them uncertainty when considering policework or early in their careers. Several participants shared memories of being intimidated by fitness requirements. While respondents joined the profession regardless, other women may be discouraged.

R1: It is a physical job. There are fights. There is a demand for a certain masculinity. And I wasn't sure I brought enough of that to the table at first.

R10: One thing that I really liked about this female officer years ago. . . She said, "If you ever want to be a cop, try to learn something like martial arts. Something to help yourself and defend yourself because you never know when you're going to need it."

R14: Work on your P.T. it's a lot harder than it looks.

R9: I would say take self-defense classes. . .you have to invest your own time, your own money so that you can be safe.

Respondents reported facing initial resentment because their fitness standards were different from their male colleagues, and several reported that demonstrating physical ability 'proved' to their colleagues that they belonged.

R6: This starts from the Academy. There were people making comments about how this is a man's job, and we don't belong here and we shouldn't be able to have our own physical standards and we shouldn't be able to stand neck and neck with someone at the range or have the opportunity to wear that same uniform and graduate with them because our physical standards are set differently.

R12: My biggest piece of advice would be to be physically fit. Like, work your butt off. I think the most respect I've ever earned on this job is always because I can keep up with the guys physically.

Teaching women candidates how to perform exercises, demystifying fitness standards, and offering demonstrations and practice tests can mitigate concerns. Several women offered realistic advice, and took pride in their own fitness.

R4: I think that women should just physically make sure that they are in shape and capable of handling situations and you don't want to have other members feel threatened if you're going to be their backup.

R2: I can't do a pull up to save my life, but I've noticed that the physical aspect isn't necessarily as difficult as I thought it was going to be. I'm pretty proud of myself. On our P.T. test I'm right at 89%.

Engaging mentorships

Respondents reported that mentorships with other women could foster recruitment and retention; however, several also reported the lack of women in the profession to serve as mentors.

R16: I don't have enough experience working one on one with other females. . .it's a very male-dominated field. So I've always just kind of been by myself.

R7: I've had these conversations with other females that I supervise and that I work with. They all felt the same. Women do not accept women very well because there are so few of us that it becomes more about competition than it does about a mentorship, or a sisterhood, or being supportive of each other.

Respondents indicated that mentorship and a culture of support among women could attract more women. This is especially the case in situations where women officers relayed incidents of being singled out by male colleagues as persons who do not belong in the profession.

R1: All the women [in the Academy class] were asked, essentially, "Why would I pick you? Why would I take you through a door? Why would I let you come with me?" And we were made in front of our classmates to answer that question. . .And one of the females, who's just a real badass, was like, "Because I'm as good as any man! F-you!," which was the right answer.

Within departments that lack representation, supportive male officers can ease uncertainty and help attract women to the profession, provided they, too, value equality.

R12: I think there's always the initial [concerns]: Are they going to be able to do the job? . . .You kind of build that trust between the two of you. . .after you work together for a little bit.

R15: So I dual-majored. I had to do an internship at a police department. . .So I started working there, interning, doing ride-alongs, and I was like, "Oh, this is kind of fun! It's exciting! You're not doing the same thing every day. It's different."

As smaller departments build representation, leadership should encourage cross-department networks.

R10: I feel like it's important for us to talk. Sometimes you're like, "Oh yeah, no, I don't want people to know my business." But sometimes it's important because. . .people out there have been through what you are going through right now and it's important to communicate and ask for help and talk to others.

Representation of women in leadership roles

Any career pursuit involves consideration of potential advancement, and a lack of representation of women in leadership may discourage applicants. When chiefs, sergeants, and instructors are all male, recruitment may be more difficult, especially if these leaders do not value inclusivity.

R1: Yeah, so in the academy we had a couple of instructors who were very clear that they did not think women belonged in police work. . .We had a couple instructors say that . . .women belong barefoot in the kitchen. . .I have the coolest chain of command right now. I work for a female sergeant who's been in the badass part of town forever.

R15: From our chief down to our sergeants, they're all men. . .I'm the first female detective in this agency.

R4: The disparity should be more equal amongst men and women but I think that men do get promoted more frequently and the advantages of being a man, they have just more.

R3: I'm actually the second female sergeant in my department, and all of our lieutenants and our chiefs are all males.

Respondents acknowledged women bring unique skills to their assignments, and this was also reflected in evaluations of women supervisors. Communication skills, fairness, and empathy were considered top attributes.

R9: Female bosses. . .it could be more of a mentor thing where they want to push you because you're female and they want you to be the best to represent the gender.

R11: I've worked with a female supervisor. . .She was a sergeant. We worked alongside of each other, but she was very respectful. . .She was very good at talking, not berating you, not talking down to you, not being condescending. . .She trusted you with a gun and a badge, and you were an adult, and if you did something wrong, it was very respectful, the way that it was addressed.

R12: Females do a better job talking to you. . .I think they do a better job of addressing the problem, kind of keeping it isolated. . .and talking to you a little bit more. . .Male bosses you get, like, the nasty email.

R14: I've only ever had one female ranking officer in my career. . .I think probably the biggest difference would be relatability. Having somebody to look up to and know that I can trust when I have a problem and that having that. . .open line of communication with her.

Respondents also reported that with the lack of women in leadership, if a woman is promoted, she is often seen as a 'token' to make the department appear equitable.

R11: I feel like if you get anything. . .or you're promoted. It's always, "Well, she got it because she was a female," not because I deserved to get it or I earned it. It's because, "Well, they kind of just have to give it to a female, so they gave it to her."

The majority of the respondents reported a desire for advancement, which fosters career retention.

R1: I do intend to go into leadership and lead police officers.

R15: I will be retiring in law enforcement. . .I will probably retire as Chief of Police. One day. That's being ambitious, but got to speak it into existence.

R8: At this point in time, I think I will [retire in policing]. I'd like to make it up in the ranks

Inequities and pigeon-holing

Our interviews revealed a consistent theme: women officers are guided, intentionally or passively, toward duties traditionally associated with their gender. Interviewees cited detective work, sexual assaults, juvenile affairs, domestic violence cases, and mental health-related assignments as their most common. Many respondents expressed frustration with pigeon-holing.

R1: A lot of women tend towards detective work. Special assault. . .places where you need to do good interviews--where you need to be able to sit and be patient and be with someone's pain. Men can be taught that, though, and I struggle because I don't like that women get stuck in these little places. . .I hate the pigeonholes.

R7: Yeah, that's my biggest pet peeve. . .if you're the only women on the shift, you're going to spend the whole shift patting down women. And men can do it just as safely and tactically as women can. . .And you're always handed the children on call.

R6: I've been the one to be pulled to a lot of domestics. . .because they think that I have the patience over a male. Or every time there's a rape or every time there's something to do with a child and, matter of fact, every time there was a death notification. I was the one that had to do it because they didn't have the guts to talk to parents, cry with them, hug them, console them.

R2: I'm not allowed to work with a female because they keep us on opposite shifts just for patrol purposes, which in my opinion is a little bit sexist.

R16: I get sent to something that usually involves somebody that might have some mental health issues. I don't know why they send me to all those but where. . .they just need to be placated for some reason, they send me.

R14: I find that my supervisors tend to send me to the sexual investigations far more than my male counterparts. . . Even when they're not in my zone. . ."We think she'd do better with you."

If prospective and rookie women officers see limited opportunities, they may be discouraged from career policing. Agency leaders must be committed to ensuring equal treatment to foster an agency norm of respect. While study participants overwhelmingly reported the climate at their agencies had improved over the course of their careers, nearly all had stories pertaining to mistreatment.

R1: There were rumors about. . ."You're sleeping around." Therefore, when I was competent it was because I was supposedly sleeping with people. I ran a Gang Task Force. I put together a task force out of the blue, and everyone said it was because I was sleeping with all the officers on the task force not because I was good at things. . .They thought I was sleeping around, so I couldn't actually advance and go places and do things with my career.

R15: The guys here can date multiple people, and, oh, it's just a guy being a guy. . .if I date two people in a six year span, it's like, "Oh, you know how she is." . .If I go against anything that someone says, it becomes, "Oh, here she goes with her attitude" or "She's PMS-ing" or "She's emotional," and I put them in their place, but it's difficult sometimes to have to constantly do that. My partner--I call him the king of

oppositional defiance, and he is like the dissenting voice on everything, and it's just like, "Oh, that's just how he is."

R16: [Discussing homicide investigation] And I figured out who it was, and as a result, the entire case broke open. . . I had been asking, asking, asking, what can I do, what can I do, what can I do? . . . And they just weren't using me. And that one thing that I did broke open an entire case that they were completely stalled on.

R14: My squad at the time, they did not bring me into their group at all. I was a permanent outsider. I spent the entire year by myself. . . On calls, they wouldn't back me up because they just didn't like me. And so that hurt because I didn't know why they didn't like me. I still don't know why. . . I got a new squad and everybody seems to enjoy me.

R11: There's a lot of cattiness among the males to bring out the shortcomings of a female officer.

To recruit and retain women, leaders need to address inequities immediately and assuredly. Hostile work environments jeopardize representation.

Family-friendly accommodations

Several of the respondents reported prioritizing their family over their job and expressed challenges finding that work–life balance within the career.

R1: If it became: I couldn't continue to be a good wife to my husband, than I would find a different way to be.

Over half of the participants had children and others expressed wanting children. The mothers interviewed reported that even though child-rearing was the responsibility of both partners, the bulk of work fell on them. They shared stories of family members urging them to not enter or remain in the field. Agency efforts to support and develop rapport with families could remove officers' burdens.

R9: I wanted to be a mom before I became a cop. . . so thinking about just. . . Is this worth it? Could I be that person that just leaves the job behind to just be a mom, or can I make them both work, even though the job is asking a lot more of me?

R13: [asked about greatest challenges in being a woman in this profession] family life and child care. . . it's not easy, especially if you have a family and children. . . And then I had a small child so it was very hard being a rookie cop and having to work crazy long hours with no days off.

R3: My children and my family worry more and more about me now than they did before because of the climate of events.

R2: My family wants me to reconsider with, you know, the heightened. . . hatred, for lack of a better word, hatred for law enforcement. My parents want me to go ahead and get out of it. My daughter wants me to.

Those respondents who felt agency leadership allowed them to have quality time with their family reported greater job satisfaction.

R1: We work five days on, five days off. So you get a lot of good time [with family].

R7: I tell people all the time prioritize your family. . . Prioritize the time with your kids or your loved ones.

DISCUSSION

Law enforcement personnel need to reflect on agency culture, values, and goals to ensure commitment to a diverse and inclusive workplace. Only then can concerted efforts be made to recruit for representation. Critically examining current recruitment efforts, fitness requirements, mentorships, gender representation at all levels, potential inequities and pigeon-holing, and family-friendly policies are important first steps in determining what may attract some and deter others.

Respondents have found their place in the profession, though they recognize needed improvements toward fostering equity. To attract women, recruitment imagery should show officers supporting communities. [Brown \(2012\)](#) examined military recruitment advertising and found women are rarely pictured in combat, which fosters a gender divide and confirms 'the connection between masculinity and warriorhood' (p. 151). If recruitment materials show male officers brandishing weapons while women are depicted in helping roles, potential recruits may sense inequities. [Webster et al. \(2020\)](#) found that recruitment materials that target one sex may foster perceptions of disadvantage in the non-beneficiary sex. Thus, representing men and women serving in similar capacities will not only attract women but will prevent men from feeling excluded. Entertainment media depicts policing as high action and intense, including car chases, guns, and violence. Case work on film disproportionately depicts violent gang members and smugglers when the reality is most case work involves property crimes and lower-level public order offenses. Recruitment messaging needs to challenge over-exaggerated, militaristic images of policing.

As the profession puts greater emphasis on community policing, the messaging should place value on seeking those wanting to help others. In a recent New Zealand Police televised recruitment campaign, viewers were shown various scenarios of citizens in distress; other citizens went against the passersby to offer help ([Perry, 2017](#)). The viewer is asked: 'Do you care enough to be a cop?' New Zealand successfully leveraged community-focussed imagery to attract recruits. In a post-Ferguson and George Floyd era, recruits desire making positive change in their communities and to the policing profession ([Gasparini, 2021](#)). Highlighting the potential impact women could make in effecting social change may be similarly compelling.

The respondents recognized that fitness requirements might deter many from applying, and they all advised potential women recruits to focus on fitness to meet standards and find acceptance. Physical agility testing has been found to disadvantage women recruits and may not provide adequate measures to predict

effectiveness (Lonsway, 2003; Schuck, 2014; *The National Center for Women and Policing*, 2000). Nationally, examination of fitness standards is in progress. Many agencies have relied on established assessments, such as the Cooper Fitness Standards, but because women are given more time for the run and are required to complete fewer push-ups and sit-ups, they may be perceived as receiving special treatment. Respondents reported facing harassment when male colleagues felt this was unjust.

In an attempt to create fitness assessments based on job function, many agencies are exploring alternate options such as obstacle courses that encompass duty-related skills. In the *NYPD's Job Standard Test (2023)*, all candidates are required to complete tasks such as surmounting a six-foot barrier, stair climbing, completing physical restraint, running in pursuit, and victim rescuing. Such simulations may eliminate gender and age distinctions, but running and sit-ups are likely to remain part of academy trainings. Physical standards should be transparent and openly shared. Whetstone *et al.* (2006) suggested agency websites clearly state job requirements, salaries and benefits, and testing information with practice questions. While the focus was on the written test, clearly defined fitness requirements with suggestions for goal-setting and achieving standards might enhance the applicant pool.

Clinkinbeard *et al.* (2021) contended that mentorships, improvements to recruitment imagery, and addressing inequalities are essential to foster inclusive recruiting. Given the low percentage of women in policing, establishing mentorships with women officers may be challenging for some agencies. Reis *et al.* (2011) found that becoming familiar with another same-sex person promotes liking and attraction. If women could find support with experienced women, they might be more likely to pursue the career.

The most successful recruitment plans will set a tone for retention and professional growth. The participants mentioned a lack of women in leadership as a possible barrier for recruits desiring career advancement. Agencies can relay their commitment to not only recruit but promote women. This can be underscored by creating a welcoming, inclusive environment, and presenting a vision of a career path, including special assignments and promotional opportunities.

Several respondents reported instances of harassment and feeling 'pigeon-holed' into certain roles. Agency leaders who conscientiously avoid assigning officers to duties based on traditional gendered norms and who immediately hold harassers accountable for mistreatment send a clear message to all officers that they are respected and valued.

Ensuring there are family-friendly policies in place can make an agency appealing to officers who have or would like to have children. The nature of shift work often results in challenges to home life. Agencies offering flexibility in scheduling can attract more women. An agency that supports the prioritizing of family connection will have officers who are more satisfied with their jobs and more eager to support other families in the community.

The qualitative, in-depth interviews provided rich insights into the experiences of women in policing, but the methodology has limitations. The subjective nature of interviews leads to potential observer bias; we made every attempt to report findings in the respondents' own words. It also must be noted that these women were succeeding in their policing careers. To better

explore recruitment strategies, examining why women choose not to pursue or remain in the profession might add new insights.

CONCLUSION

It remains unclear whether the 30 × 30 Initiative will succeed in its goal of recruiting 30% women candidates by 2030. These women's voices suggested that some strides have been made, some proposals have been stalled, and more proactivity is needed in recruitment initiatives. While these women have expressed belonging, if agencies are committed to increasing representation, leadership needs to critically assess the culture and ensure gender inequities are consistently and immediately addressed, paths toward advancement are evident, family-friendly practices are in place, and women can find support with other women. Agencies that value inclusivity and can effectively share this culture in recruitment campaigns are more likely to attract women. Unfortunately, recruitment imagery often highlights militaristic themes over community policing (Silvestri, 2017), which may exclude women who would otherwise join to 'make a difference'. Furthermore, recruitment needs to be proactive by offering experiential opportunities that simulate fitness tests and foster mentorship (e.g. job shadowing and ride-alongs); being exposed to realistic eligibility requirements and job expectations may challenge self-doubt among prospective recruits. The respondents reported some challenges on their path to finding their place in the profession, but they all took pride in their career. One respondent valued her position as a role model, stating, 'There's a little girl somewhere watching us who wants to be a police officer.'

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

The first few questions ask about your perceived challenges as a woman in policing.

- Have you experienced challenges with being accepted by fellow officers because of your sex?
- Do you feel at greater risk when dealing with those suspected of a crime because of your sex?
- Are you treated differently by the public you serve because of your sex?
- What are the greatest challenges in being a woman in this profession?
- Have you worked with both male and female leadership? If so, what were the differences in their styles?
- Have you worked with both male and female partners? If so, what were the differences in their styles?
- Will you remain in law enforcement and retire as a police officer?
- What could happen that would make you consider leaving the profession?
- Have recent events made you reconsider your career path?

The second set of questions ask you to share your perceptions on the ways that the profession benefits by having female officers.

Is there a need for women in policing? Explain.
 How do women best contribute to the profession?
 In your opinion, are there aspects of policing that women, in general, are better suited for?
 Do you think that you are sent to specific types of calls based on your gender?
 Can you suggest any strategies for navigating turbulent times in policing?

The final questions ask you to share your own experience in policing.

How did you get into policing? Was it a long term aspiration or a stumble?

How does policing benefit you personally?

What would you tell other women who may be considering a career in policing?

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