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Original Article

'The bar is different as a woman': A thematic analysis of career advice given by female police officers

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ABSTRACT

In an effort to reduce gender disparities in policing and move beyond the current legitimacy crisis faced by the profession, there has been a renewed focus on increasing the recruitment and retention of female police officers. Beyond understanding why current female officers have remained in the field, it is important to understand why some have left the profession altogether. The current study employs deductive and inductive coding of a mixed-methods self-report survey from 154 current and former female officers in the Dallas Police Department (DPD). We sought to examine the advice that current and former female police officers would give to other women who might want to enter or promote within policing. Responses highlighted challenges related to the impact on family life, navigating the male-dominated culture, maintaining one's sense of identity and integrity, and creating strong social support networks. Implications for the DPD and other agencies are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Decades of research shows that women's entry into policing has stalled, and their progression through the ranks is even further lacking (Cordner and Cordner, 2011; Goodison, 2022; Hyland and Davis, 2019). Although studies have consistently identified the benefits of women in policing for improving organizational culture, women officers continue to report numerous hurdles they must overcome to succeed in the police profession (Rabe-Hemp, 2008; Todak, 2023). In light of renewed attention to increasing the number of women in policing thanks to initiatives like 30 × 30 (an initiative to increase female police officer representation to at least 30% by the year 2030; 30 x 30, 2021) and the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (a group tasked with making recommendations for law enforcement to reduce crime while increasing public trust; 2015), it is important to understand how to motivate and guide women who are interested in becoming police officers and those who are interested in becoming police leaders. One of the best ways to understand how to advance the interests of underrepresented groups is to ask members of those groups who have already faced and overcome those barriers what advice they would give to others seeking to achieve the same goals. Additionally, it becomes important to understand why former female officers have separated from their department in order to know where improvements can be made. As such, the purpose of this study is to take an in-depth look at advice current and former female Dallas Police Officers would provide to other women who want to become a police officer and to women who want to become police supervisors.

Current climate

It is not possible to talk about policing without addressing the current climate. Staffing shortages have been reported in police organizations across the world (Dearden, 2023; Jansen, 2023; Lynch, 2023). Although there are many potential causes of this trend (e.g. COVID-19, high publicity incidents of police use of force, and baby boomers retiring), the solutions are clear: recruit more police officers and retain the officers currently employed for the full duration of their careers. In terms of recruiting, policing has historically been a desirable profession due to job security and the ability to improve communities (Raganella and White, 2004; Todak *et al.*, 2018). However, policing typically attracted a certain type of applicant: a young, White, physically fit, man. Given the need to fill the ranks, police agencies need to appeal to a broader pool of applicants. Attracting women, who make up roughly half of the population but less than 20% of police agencies (Goodison, 2022), could help address this gap.

Recruiting women to policing poses unique challenges. The current lack of women police officers to serve as examples to others could prevent women from viewing policing as an option (National Center for Women and Policing, 2000). Increased representation of women in policing in the media can serve as a useful way to inspire women to consider police careers (e.g.,

Morabito and Shelley, 2018; Todak *et al.*, 2022), though early studies suggest that women were often not depicted as crime fighters on television (Rabe-Hemp, 2009). Existing hiring and training requirements could also differentially screen women out of the process (Kringen and Novich, 2018; Paoline and Sloan, 2022). A study of college students interested in pursuing careers in policing after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson (MO) indicated that women, more than men, were motivated by a desire to improve police–community relations (Todak, 2017). As such, attracting women to policing could also help address the legitimacy crisis in policing if women are empowered to promote change.

Beyond recruitment, research suggests that the current policing climate impacts retention. A synthetic control study suggests that voluntary resignations increased by 279% as a result of the George Floyd protests. Importantly, similar reductions in retirements and involuntary separations did not occur, suggesting that police officers were intentionally choosing to leave the field to pursue other employment (Mourtgos *et al.*, 2022). Research from the UK suggests that women are more likely to voluntarily resign from policing than men (Alexander and Charman, 2023). As such, the current climate could exacerbate traditional challenges in retaining women. The higher rate of women who leave policing than men is particularly concerning given that the number of women joining policing is not increasing at the pace needed to retain the current proportion of women officers (Alexander and Charman, 2023).

Difficulties being a female officer

Women face barriers within police organizations, including internal challenges associated with agencies themselves, navigating a hyper-masculine culture, and facing discrimination. Women must balance these internal challenges with external familial responsibilities. Police agencies have made efforts to improve these conditions through providing mentorship programs and implementing family–friendly policies. Yet, research suggests that women today face the same barriers as women in policing decades ago (National Center for Women and Policing, 2000; Police Executive Research Forum, 2023), patterns attributed to the nature and development of policing.

Police organizational policies and processes have been historically dominated by men, rendering policing a gendered organization (Acker, 1992; Brown *et al.*, 2020) in which women are sometimes viewed as tokens (Archbold and Schulz, 2008; Kanter, 2008). Research suggests that women are commonly assigned administrative roles or those involving large amounts of paperwork (Rabe-Hemp, 2008), with a significant underrepresentation of women in elite specialty units (Todak *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, assignments that are considered traditionally female are less respected within the organization than those considered traditionally male (Haake, 2018), a factor that could ultimately influence differences in promotions for women and men. Some women suggest that they spend more time talking to victims than their male counterparts, who are more interested in pursuing arrests to increase their numbers (Rabe-Hemp, 2009). As a result, both the types of assignments women receive and the different ways they approach their roles could lead to differential promotional opportunities across gender lines.

Machismo has been a central feature of the police culture, wherein women feel like their competence is consistently questioned by colleagues, an experience male officers do not face (Alexander and Charman, 2023). The ideal worker in policing encompasses many male characteristics, including physical strength and crime-fighting, with the emphasis on physicality resulting in organizational policies and practices that exclude women (Silvestri, 2017). Contemporarily, these ideals form what is known as a 'warrior mindset', wherein officers view their primary job functions as one of crime-fighting, rather than one of service-providing (see McLean *et al.*, 2020; Sloan and Paoline, 2021).

Although agencies report wanting to increase the number of women employed, informal culture, and personnel processes are less supportive of the inclusion of women officers (Angehrn *et al.*, 2021).[1] Some police women report that they only truly felt accepted after they had proven themselves capable of the physical aspects of policing through winning a fight with a suspect (Rabe-Hemp, 2008). Though gendered institutions involve overt practices that exclude women (e.g. historical requirements that police officers be men), they can also involve practices that appear to be gender neutral, yet still exclude women (e.g. physical aptitude tests based on male physiology; Acker, 1992). This manifests as women and men being provided equal opportunities on paper, but women's voices being given less weight in decision-making in practice (Angehrn *et al.*, 2021).

In addition to physical differences between men and women that lead to gendered perceptions of capability, there are also differences in behaviors and traits that can be biased against women. Women report having to actively focus on how they are perceived (Angehrn *et al.*, 2021). A study of women who discussed challenges they faced during promotion included those who were criticized for being 'too nice' and those who were criticized because others thought they were 'a bitch' (Todak, 2023), highlighting the resistance women face on both ends of the spectrum. Some men felt that the women officers they worked with were too compassionate, leading them to make poor decisions in some incidents (Angehrn *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, when a woman makes a mistake, it is viewed as reflecting on all women in the organization because of their status as 'tokens' (Rabe-Hemp, 2008). To overcome these disparities in perceptions based on physical strength and temperament, women have turned to other sources to achieve legitimacy. For example, women have reported that education is an important avenue for promotional attainment (Morabito and Shelley, 2018), and women with higher levels of education do have higher odds of promotion (Huff and Todak, 2023).

Some women have reported that they chose not to pursue a promotion because of previous experiences of discrimination (Angehrn *et al.*, 2021), a major concern given that the benefits of women in policing could be limited if women are not given the authority and positions needed to change culture. A study by Hassell and Brandl (2009) examined the impact of individual demographics on general workplace experiences of patrol officers and highlighted several notable findings, including that

[1]Some have contextualized this pattern in social identity theory, in which in-groups of men lash out at out-groups of women in policing, particularly when those women are in positions of power (Brown *et al.*, 2019).

(1) women police officers generally report experiencing more negative workplace experiences than men, with these differences being even more stark for racial minorities, (2) police women of all racial/ethnic backgrounds reported significantly higher experiences of sexual harassment and vulgar and offensive language than White men in Milwaukee, and (3) Black and Latina women (but not White women) reported experiencing significantly more stress than White men officers. Additionally, both men and women in qualitative interviews reported that sexual harassment and discrimination persists, with women reporting having to endure and some men reporting having to go along with it to fit into the culture (Alexander and Charman, 2023). As such, the burden for dealing with gender-based discrimination falls on women officers who must withstand these experiences, rather than on men who are not expected to stop these cycles (Angehrn *et al.*, 2021).

What is more, a recent study by Alexander and Charman (2023) suggests that women are just as likely to pass promotional exams for front-line supervisory positions as men, women are less likely to apply for these positions, thereby reducing the number of women in leadership. One of the struggles women police leaders reported in interviews is balancing expectations of their leadership position and their childcare responsibilities and time with family. Furthermore, though 95% of men in leadership positions in that study had children, only 56% of women in the same positions reported having children (Alexander and Charman, 2023). This provides some evidence that women experience pressure to choose between their career and family. In interviews of women police in 12 agencies of a variety of size and type in England and Wales, only 4 of the agencies maintained a formalized pregnancy policy (Rabe-Hemp, 2008), indicating limited organizational support for childbearing in that study. Research suggests that both men and women choose not to promote due to concerns about balancing childcare responsibilities, suggesting that the adoption of family–friendly policies will benefit *all* officers, even if those benefits are felt more acutely by women (Drew and Saunders, 2020; Rabe-Hemp, 2008). Women in some studies report strategically choosing when to have children to avoid concerns about uniforms and equipment (Morabito and Shelley, 2018). However, women still feel pressure to return to work quickly after having children to ensure they are viewed as taking their careers or promotional aspirations seriously (Morabito and Shelley, 2018).

Barriers to promotion

As highlighted above, numerous barriers to promoting women persist. In interviews with men and women police leaders in Sweden, women supported the use of organizational and cultural change to improve the promotion of women in policing—such as reducing discrimination and opportunity barriers—while men recommended changes to the women themselves—such as improving on their confidence and drive to do the job (Haake, 2018). This suggests that women view the barriers as organizational, and men view the barriers as personal to the individual women. There are other hurdles inherently built into the structure of police organizations, which involve a paramilitary rank hierarchy that limits the number of available leadership roles. In order for women to advance, leadership positions need to become available, which requires men to vacate them (Alexander and Charman, 2023). Even when police agencies implement policies to increase the number of women in leadership, this might not increase the number of women applying for promotion if they feel unsupported by their colleagues (Drew and Saunders, 2020; Todak, 2023). Strong influences of support women receive for pursuing promotion and the anticipated pushback they expect to receive if promoted highlights the importance of mentorship for women in policing (Drew and Saunders, 2020; Morabito and Shelley, 2018).

There are also substantial time considerations inherent in decisions to promote. Achieving promotion often requires working full time, without using part-time or flexible work options, which could signal that the officer is less committed to their career (Silvestri, 2017). Women who go on maternity leave also feel judged by their colleagues, which can lead to feelings of shame and pressure to return to work quickly (Angehrn *et al.*, 2021). Preparing for promotional exams requires long hours of studying outside of working hours, which can disadvantage women with familial responsibilities (Todak, 2023). Familial support is particularly important for women with children, who often need to coordinate childcare and face unique challenges when promoting requires a shift change (Morabito and Shelley, 2018; Todak *et al.*, 2021).

Although the structure of police promotional processes vary widely across agencies (Huff and Todak, 2023), prior research has raised concerns that these systems could place women at a disadvantage based on a series of issues that depict men as more experienced and qualified to lead (Todak, 2023). Promotions are meant to be granted to those who work hard on patrol, earn positive reputations, and perform well on promotional exams, but research suggests that men benefit from these perceptions more than women who are not automatically perceived as capable (Morabito and Shelley, 2018). Male police officers in Queensland, Australia, were more likely than their female counterparts to agree that women would be promoted for their gender rather than their skills (Drew and Saunders, 2020). The belief that women will automatically receive promotions just because they are women undermines their accomplishments and can lead to a perception that women are taking opportunities away from men without truly earning them. This is a concern for women who wanted to feel like they were promoted because they were the best candidates (Todak, 2023). Some women even reported that their agencies intentionally minimized the number of women in command by promoting men who score worse on exams instead of women to maintain low levels of women in supervisory positions (Todak, 2023). Although both men and women leaders report that women are often subject to more scrutiny than men, this does not translate to women being more respected than men in leadership positions, despite the need to defend every decision they make (Haake, 2018).

METHODS

Procedure and measures

Potential participants were identified by a member of the research team and their contact information (email address for current officers or cell phone number for former officers) was provided to the lead researcher on the project (study was cleared

through institutional review board of the primary author's university). Respondents were sent a Qualtrics survey link via either email or cell phone and officers were made aware that a survey was going to be sent out to avoid sending the survey to trash or reporting it as spam. Respondents received an overview of the reason for being contacted, informed of their right to refuse or participate, and supplied with a Qualtrics link. They were then redirected to a separate Qualtrics link where they could provide their email address if they wished to opt into receiving a $5 eGift card for their participation.[2] This was done to guarantee their email addresses could not be linked to their survey responses, ensuring anonymity.

The survey was administered as part of a larger overall project examining female officer recruitment and retention within the Dallas Police Department (DPD) and contained questions related to respondents' experiences entering, working within, promoting (or attempting to promote), and leaving (if applicable) policing. The mixed-methods survey took approximately 12–15 min to complete. The present study focussed on one open-ended question designed to elicit advice for future female officers. Respondents were asked, *'What advice would you have for other women who want to enter or promote within law enforcement?'*

Study site and sample

As of April 2023, DPD employed 3,053 sworn officers, with 586 of those being female. The racial/ethnic breakdown of the department is 43% White, non-Hispanic, 25% Black/African American, non-Hispanic, 27% Hispanic, and 4% Asian/Native American/Other. Most of the female sworn officers at the DPD work in patrol (n = 320), with the next majority working in the administrative bureau (n = 82; though this does also include recruits currently assigned to the Academy). This is in contrast to the placements for the male police officers, who, aside from those who work in patrol (n = 1,449), the next largest majority work in the tactical and special operations bureau (n = 312).

A Qualtrics survey was sent out to 915 female DPD officers (590 current officers and 325 former officers). The final sample size was 217 total responses (23.7% response rate), with 179 current DPD officers (82.5%) and 38 former DPD officers (17.5%).[3] Of the 217 survey respondents, 154 provided a response to the question pertinent in this study (71% response rate; n = 126). Approximately 81.8% of responses were from current officers (n = 126) and 18.2% of responses were from former officers (n = 28). Race and ethnicity for the sample was as follows: 61.4% White, non-Hispanic; 24.8% Hispanic; 17.7% Black/African American, non-Hispanic. Fifty percent of the sample was married, with 65.6% having at least one child. The mean age of the sample was 41.8 years (SD = 9.6 years). Approximately 11% of the sample was a military veteran, with approximately 70% having at least a bachelor's degree. The average tenure of the sample was 15.6 years of service (SD = 9.1 years).

Analytical plan

The present study utilized both deductive and inductive coding. A priori hypotheses predicted that responses would be largely categorized into one of three groupings: (1) generally negative; (2) generally positive; and (3) somewhat positive, with a disclaimer. These expectations are consistent with prior research suggesting that some women successfully navigate the promotional processes, others are barred from these opportunities, and others are not interested in promoting (Morabito and Shelley, 2018). There were multiple rounds of coding at each stage: first, deductive coding with these groupings in mind, followed by multiple rounds of inductive coding to better understand potential nuances within these groupings.[4] Coding was done using the Delve software (Ho and Limpaecher, n.d.) platform.

RESULTS[5]

Consistent with the a priori hypotheses, the responses provided by the women in this sample could be grouped into one of three categories: (1) absolute discouragement; (2) encouragement, with a disclaimer; and (3) absolute encouragement. The following sections are broken up to describe the more nuanced content of each of these themes. It is important to note that respondents could have given advice that fell into multiple categories, so numbers may not total 154 exactly.

Strong discouragement

One group of responses (n = 17) simply discouraged any entrance into the field of law enforcement, regardless of gender. Generally, these statements came in the form of 'don't', 'don't do it', or 'don't bother'. More descriptive responses noted the current climate surrounding law enforcement. One respondent highlighted that 'in today's political/social climate I would not encourage anyone to enter law enforcement, male or female' (R49). This focus on the 'climate' was expanded upon by Respondent 7 who indicated because 'no mistakes are acceptable ever . . . I would highly discourage entering law enforcement now'. In a more detailed description of *why* someone should not join law enforcement, one respondent acknowledged that potential officers should 'make sure [they] are prepared to give and give without receiving anything in return', and that 'if this is your only choice, make it great, [but] law enforcement steals a piece of your life' (R22). This concept of making the most of a career that generally is not very welcoming in return is discussed further below. Finally, while most respondents simply discouraged entrance into policing broadly, three respondents (two current, one former) particularly indicated not to join the DPD, or that there were other departments who 'respect and support women more than DPD' (R77).

Encouragement, with a disclaimer

Most of the responses (n = 103) offered encouragement for entering the field, but with a disclaimer. By this, there was general agreement

[2]This project was funded in part by a Texas State University internal research grant. Approximately 131 respondents opted into receiving a participation gift card.

[3]This is consistent with most response rates for online surveys (approximately 29%; Nayak and Narayan, 2019).

[4]Due to IRB considerations, only the lead researcher was involved in the rounds of coding, though the co-authors offered feedback and recommendations after coding was completed.

[5]Quotes are corrected for flow of language. Emphasis within quotes included by respondent.

that women *should* join the field if it was something they really wanted to do, but that they should know about some of the difficulties they were likely to encounter. These disclaimers predominately centred on familial concerns, the traditional male culture, maintaining one's own identity, and having a strong support system.

Impact on family

One of the commonly discussed topics (n = 29) related to the impact of the job on the family life of female officers. Responses here appeared to serve as a warning about the difficulties or impossibilities of managing family life, or as a warning to always put your family first. One current officer noted that 'coming into this profession, there is almost an expectation that family time will be cut and/or limited due to the shifts and responsibilities of the job' (R101). This concern was particularly highlighted as one rises in the ranks and 'starts over' in terms of shift selection (meaning you could go from patrol officer on day shift to patrol sergeant on nights; R144). Furthermore, many respondents emphasized that if officers are wanting to promote, they should do so early on, before having children. One current officer plainly stated that officers should 'get ready to choose [their] career or [their] family. Women do NOT get to have both without major sacrifice' (R118). This apparent difference in how men and women officers with children experience work highlights that while 'things have improved over time, women in this profession are still not taken as seriously as their male counterparts, especially as they rise in rank' (R193).

While many of the responses focussed on the difficulties of managing work and family life, several others were more optimistic in their assessment of the impact of the job on family. Commentary here focussed on reminders of 'family first always' (R87) and that 'policing is just a job and it will never be more important than your personal life' (R146). Along these same lines, officers were encouraged to not sacrifice their family and personal life just for the sake of their careers. It is important to understand that while this may not be the case at all departments, one current officer highlighted that officers '[shouldn't] be afraid to ask for help, most supervisors are extremely understanding when it comes to childcare, etc'. (R144).

Machismo

Also discussed (n = 29) were concerns related to one aspect of the police culture—*machismo* (Silvestri, 2017). Many respondents offered advice that officers should not try to fit into the 'boys club' (R186; echoed by R66) and that female officers should 'be ready to work harder than [their] male counterparts' (R62). One current officer detailed some of the gendered cultural challenges that permeate all aspects of the job:

> Come into this profession knowing that you will have to work twice as hard as the male officers and that will never change. Expect to work all of the worse shifts, the worse assignments, nights, holidays, weekends etc., embrace this and realize that you can learn something everywhere you go. (R163)

Other advice focussed on the potential for romantic relationships to occur in the workplace. Whether it was advice to 'be careful that your friendliness is not seen as flirting' (R6), or to 'be mindful of men (especially supervisors) who know how to manipulate you into a relationship' (R15), many responses appeared to serve as a warning to know the line between friendliness and flirtation and be careful not to cross it. One former officer poignantly discussed a commonly known phrase that serves to gatekeep who will be accepted into which cliques within the department, 'you are either a bitch or a hoe' (R15).

One's identity and sense of self

Another commonly discussed concept (n = 47) related to having and maintaining one's identity and sense of self. While there were many versions of 'know your worth', such as 'be true to yourself' (R123), 'be strong' (R136), and 'don't lose yourself' (R199), one current officer expanded this sentiment to include 'stand your ground and support and encourage your fellow female officers' (R160). In addition to these pieces of advice, respondents encouraged officers to 'have thick skin' (R38; echoed by R198), both in terms of accepting criticism by colleagues and the public, as well as in dealing with jokes and other forms of 'cop humor' they may encounter.

There was an apparent need to emphasize the constant pressure to prove oneself that is often felt by women in policing. This, of course, relates to the above discussion of machismo, and how female officers must perform better than their male colleagues to receive *almost* comparable levels of respect. One respondent noted this and highlighted that 'you will always have to prove yourself. So do it. Prove you're better than expectations' (R80). This 'come in, do your job, and leave' type of attitude was inferred to by many respondents, in various terms; a few of which are included below:

> Don't get sidetracked with the petty messes, do your job, do it right, maintain your integrity and push yourself to promote to whatever rank you aspire to, whatever you do, make *them* tell you no. (R32)
>
> Speak your mind when necessary, do not shrink yourself to make other people comfortable. Demand equal treatment when issues arise. (R188)
>
> Be able to make decisions and stick with them with confidence. Have thick skin and be able to stand up for yourself. (R130)
>
> You have to work twice as hard as any man in this profession. Show up, do the work, do the little things, treat people the way you want to be treated. (R107)

It becomes clear that women in policing feel like they must work harder, take criticism better, and be aggressive (but not too aggressive) in their decision-making, compared to their male counterparts, leaving little room for error.

Have a strong social support system

Finally, a number of responses (n = 22) were related to having a social support system, both within and outside of the organization. Certainly, there was focus on having immediate family that understood the demands of the job, but more of the emphasis was simply on having non-law enforcement friends and supporters. One current officer highlighted the value of having non-police family and friends, especially for childcare availability and assistance (R201). It was apparent that having a strong non-law

enforcement support system was not only important but was really crucial to female officers that want to promote within the organization, due largely to the way assignments are handed out based on seniority. One former officer noted the importance of these support systems and promotions:

> Despite changes to assignments and shifts, with a support system outside the job you can make it work. There might be growing pains at first but keep [your] eye on [the] goal and things will settle as you hope them to. (R12)

In addition to the outside-of-work social support, responses highlighted the importance of social support within the organization, particularly from other female officers. With the potential to add additional stress by effectively forcing female officers to act as model employees and mentors, there was a very real understanding that one's behaviour would impact other women who sought out this job in the future. Respondent 90 explicitly noted that 'your professionalism and good work ethic paves the way for future females'.

Much of this discussion was related to representation (or the lack thereof) of female officers in higher ranks. Respondents detailed that officers should not get discouraged at the lack of representation in higher ranks or specialty units (R126; echoed by R173) and that they should promote up to *become* that representation for future officers. In these discussions, respondents encouraged officers to find and talk to women who are working in the areas they wish to work in. While of course this mentorship is crucial, it does add additional emotional labour to the women who serve in these roles. One current officer acknowledged the importance of this role and of 'not pulling up the ladder' when one finds themselves in a leadership role:

> To remember where they came from and show grace to other female officers. In my personal experience, I have dealt with more discouragement from ranking female officers than I have from males. (R82)

Of course, in line with the discussion about working hard and focussing on the job, a handful of respondents encouraged officers to avoid socializing and creating these support systems altogether, as they perceived them to be more of a distraction and potential liability to one's career aspirations (R40).

Strong encouragement

A final group of responses (n = 45) offered wholehearted encouragement. With a lot of variations of 'Do it girl!' (R37), 'Go for it!' (R64), and 'work hard' (R70), these responses either offered simple encouragement or promotion-related encouragement and tips. Responses that offered general encouragement emphasized being a strong leader and role model for other women (R58; R66), in order to encourage other women to join the force in the future. Additional tips included here were related to personal accountability for success. Respondent 72 stressed that 'if it's your dream, follow it and make it happen. It's your dream; no one else has a responsibility to make it happen for you'.

Promote early and often (n = 42)

Among this final category, a number of respondents (n = 42) advised prospective and current female officers to seek out and apply for promotional opportunities, *when the time is right for them and their families*. This emphasis on timing and preparedness was noted by several respondents, with Respondent 21 stating that officers should 'promote once [they] feel confident in the rank [they] are. Don't rush to promote, [they] will only do [themselves] a disservice' (echoed by R181). Additional respondents referred back to the promotional policy that has 'you "start over" on seniority when you promote, but that with time you will have the better shifts or positions you want' (R131; echoed by R7). Nine respondents provided a succinct sentence that relayed their thoughts on promoting, stated below.

'Promote . . .'
'. . . as often as you can' (R2)
'. . . as quickly and as high as you can' (R20)
'. . . as soon as available' (R43)
'. . . early and quickly' (R57)
'. . . early and help other female officers whenever you can' (R171)
'. . . early' (R99)
'. . . even if you have a baby or family' (R104)
'. . . we need more women in higher ranks' (R36)
'. . . once you feel confident in the rank you are' (R21)

It is very clear that there is encouragement to promote, for personal, professional, or altruistic reasons. Respondent 133 again highlighted the importance of representation in higher ranks for future female officers: 'You should attempt to promote to whatever rank you feel, because proper representation is important to the diversity and different perspective in whatever rank you may be in'. It then becomes important to understand if this aspect of police work is unique to women in policing or is faced by all members of marginalized or tokenized groups.

DISCUSSION

Despite the acknowledgement of the social difficulties surrounding the occupation of policing, there was an immense amount of support for women, from women, to enter and promote in policing. As it relates to entrance into the field of policing, respondents alluded to being the change they wished to see, and joining the force to make a difference, consistent with prior research (Todak, 2017). This encouragement was often followed by and tempered with disclaimers about ensuring proper social support. Conversely, there was some hesitation to recommend this job to any individual, regardless of gender, due to the current climate surrounding the field. These themes were similarly identified when respondents discussed promoting within the field of policing; that modelling success in these positions for other women would be beneficial, but having strong support systems in place would be crucially important.

The women in this sample provided considerations that are crucial for potential employees to understand, particularly those that are gendered in nature. Importantly, a key consideration was related to the impact of the job on family and one's

ability to have children *and* a successful career. The ability to balance work and life and have support systems in both of these areas was key, especially for those who wished to promote up in the force. Indeed, ensuring that female officers can balance both of these areas should be important to everyone who works in a police organization, not just the women (Haake, 2018), and these support systems are integral to their success (Rabe-Hemp, 2008).

Despite the focus on family life and childcare in particular, respondents also highlighted the importance of understanding the 'cult of masculinity' that is present in policing (Silvestri, 2017). A lot of the discussion focussed on the perception of needing to work harder than their male colleagues, while also still potentially being passed over for opportunities. Similarly, as it relates to female officers' relationships and proximity to their male colleagues, respondents provided what could be considered as a warning, that female officers 'are either a bitch or a hoe' (R15), and they should work to retain their integrity and sense of identity as best they can.

While female officers were advised that they should more or less come in, do the job, and leave, it is crucial that women within police organizations should not be treated as a monolithic group with sole responsibility for advancing their own interests or careers (Haake, 2018). The importance of internal and external social support was explicit, with Respondent 12 noting that these sources of support play a critical role in the success of female officers. What is more, respondents offered strong levels of encouragement focussed on the promotional process, advising other female officers to promote early in their career and as often as was reasonable for them and their families. Important emphasis was placed on the value of representation in leadership roles and how crucial it is for more junior female officers to see themselves in those that are leading the organization.

There are several notable strengths of the current study. First and foremost, we were able to access female police officers that have separated from the department for personal or professional reasons. Much research examining the recruitment and retention of female police officers focuses primarily on those currently working within the department (e.g. Hill *et al.*, 2022; Todak, 2023), but less is known about *why* female officers leave/have left. This was able to provide the research team with additional insight into ways DPD could improve to increase the representation of female officers on their force. Second, while the aim of the project was to better understand the factors that impact recruitment and retention of female officers, the mixed-methods survey provided these women with the opportunity to share their voice and opinions on a topic that is very personal to them.[6] Finally, the response rate for the overall survey was approximately 23%. Considering this was an online survey administered via email or text message, this was a successful response rate for what we would expect to see in this type of research, which is approximately 29% (Nayak and Narayan, 2019).

Though there were a number of strengths in this study, there are several limitations that must be discussed. First, this was a cross-sectional mixed-methods survey, and as such is limited by the emotions, time, and situations surrounding the respondent at the moment they submitted the survey. Collecting more longitudinal data will provide added quantitative context for why respondents may leave or stay. Second, there is potential for generalizability and selection bias concerns. While the goal of qualitative research focuses less on generalizing findings to broader audiences, the individual and organizational demographics in the current study is unique. Future research would seek to replicate this study with other agencies, both similar and different to the DPD. Additionally, there is likely to be notable selection bias in terms of: (1) who responded to the survey in general and (2) who provided feedback to this particular question. It is likely that the people who responded had strong opinions (positive or negative) about the job and chose to use this as an opportunity to voice those opinions.

Limitations aside, the present study has important implications for policy and practice. First and foremost, cultural changes are needed in order to ensure all officers—male and female—have an understanding and appreciation of the impact of the job on family life. Respondents emphasized that at times there was a lack of support and understanding from other women, rather than men, in terms of being a woman on the job and other difficulties related to family life. However, it is noted that this is something that may be easier said than done. Second, there are a number of tangible ways that the DPD and other agencies could work to make departments more family–friendly, including focussing on childcare accommodations (e.g. housing a daycare on site, contracting with a daycare, or providing stipends to assist in the funding of daycare) or shift considerations for those with children. Third, despite promotions being a separate focus of the survey, this particular question elicited a lot of context about the promotional process. Respondents noted a perception about being passed over for opportunities, despite personal qualifications. It is important to note that within the DPD, all promotional exams are based off of test scores, which produce a public scored list. Therefore, absent significant discipline, individuals with the highest scores get the promotions, regardless of gender. That this perception may exist among some individuals is likely to be a function of personal feeling, rather than reality. Additionally, respondents indicated having fewer opportunities for additional training that could assist in future promotions, a lack of transparency in the promotional timeframe and process, and the overall subjectivity of the promotional process. This type of messaging is consistent with recent research on women and the police promotional process (Alexander and Charman, 2023; Todak, 2023). The DPD could then benefit from providing more clarity on the timeline and processes related to promotions. Future research may begin to tap into these concepts utilizing face-to-face surveys, interviews, or focus groups with both female and male police officers. Understanding the male perspective of the support (or lack thereof) for female officer representation can provide unique insight into creating a more inclusive culture.

The present study examined the advice given to women who may want to become police officers or promote within policing. While a large majority of responses were generally positive in nature, many of these positive messages came with disclaimers about difficulties that are inherent to being a woman in policing. These difficulties centred around the

[6]Anecdotally, the research team received acknowledgement of appreciation for doing the research and trying to make changes on their behalf.

impact on family, navigating the machismo culture within policing, maintaining one's integrity or identity, and building a strong internal and external social support group. Ultimately, women's acceptance within a police organization is something that is continuously renegotiated (Rabe-Hemp, 2008), and there are many structural and cultural changes that need to occur in order for women to feel truly supported in this occupation.

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