

Women on the Move? A Report on the Status of Women in Policing

by Susan E. Martin

Introduction

by Hubert Williams
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Police Foundation research on women in policing in the early 1970s, along with changes in federal civil rights legislation and emerging case law, made a pivotal contribution to policing. The research found that women could effectively perform patrol duties from which they had been excluded because of their gender; changes in the law were designed to eliminate such discrimination.

How much actual progress has been made since then? According to our latest research, which follows a similar study in 1978, a variety of strategies, not the least of which is affirmative action, in combination with the evolving body of law, has fostered substantial growth in the ranks of women in policing.

The police and the public have gained by this opening of opportunity. It has given us a broader range of qualified applicants for police jobs and thus enhanced our ability to protect and provide services to the community. Moreover, our police forces have come to reflect more broadly both the composition and the values of our society.

And yet, with all this, there are compelling reasons not to become complacent. Our research shows that while the percentage of women in policing has risen considerably, the overall picture is less than sanguine. Despite the barriers we have overcome, women still comprise under ten percent of all police officers. Their representation in the supervisory and managerial ranks is even lower.

There is considerable evidence that affirmative action programs, both voluntary and court-ordered, have had a positive impact on recruiting women into the field. In order to extend the gains we have made thus far, the profession must continue to make special efforts to recruit women. We must also be certain that our policies and procedures, e.g., those on parental leave, do not encourage women to leave the field at a greater rate than men—which seems to be the case at present.

The research findings presented in this report are part of a larger study being conducted by the Police Foundation with funding support of The Ford Foundation. We are confident that the results will add not only to our knowledge about the numbers of women in policing, but to our understanding of what those numbers mean and to our strategies for correcting the imbalances that still exist.

Abstract

In the years following the passage of the 1972 Amendments to the Civil Rights Act, policing made significant progress in eliminating discrimination in the hiring and promotion of women. The proportion of women in both officer and supervisory ranks has increased substantially. That progress notwithstanding, there is still much to be done to correct the overall underrepresentation of women in policing.

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From the entry of the first sworn female into policing in 1910 until 1972, women officers were selected according to separate criteria from men, employed as “policewomen,” and limited to working with “women, children and typewriters” (Milton, 1972). The passage of the 1972 Amendments to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, however, extended the Act’s coverage to state and local government employees and thus guaranteed under law equal opportunity in policing. Since that date, many departments, often under the threat of a court order, have eliminated discriminatory personnel policies.

How far had these changes gone through the mid-1980s? Although most experts assumed some significant progress had been made, it was apparent that there was more to be done. Just how much, however, was unclear. The research evidence was limited.¹ The Police Foundation had completed its last research on this matter in 1978. And so, in an effort to quantify change and provide data that would guide future policies, the Police Foundation initiated in 1987 a study that included a mail survey of personnel practices in municipal and state police agencies. This report summarizes the survey findings from municipal agencies and points to some of their policy implications. (A full report on the study will be completed in late 1989.)

The Survey

The national mail survey of police personnel practices sought information on: (1) departmental policies and practices regarding recruitment, selection, and promotion; (2) the number and percentage of male and female officers by ethnic group, rank, and assignment; (3) male and female officer turnover rates; and (4) the existence and nature of other personnel policies related to women, including those on affirmative action, sexual harassment, and pregnancy and maternity leave.

Questionnaires were sent to all 446 municipal police departments serving populations of 50,000 and all state police agencies. This was the same sample used by the Police Foundation in its 1978 survey of women in policing.² Seventy-two percent of the municipal departments returned usable surveys.³

The Results

Representation of Women in Policing

The proportion of women among sworn police personnel has grown steadily since 1972. In that year, a survey of cities serving populations of 250,000 or more revealed that women comprised only 2 percent of uniformed law enforcement personnel (ICMA, 1972). In 1978, women made up 4.2 percent of sworn personnel in municipal departments serving populations over 50,000 (see Figure 1). By the end of 1986, the proportion of women had risen to 8.8 percent of all sworn officers in these agencies.

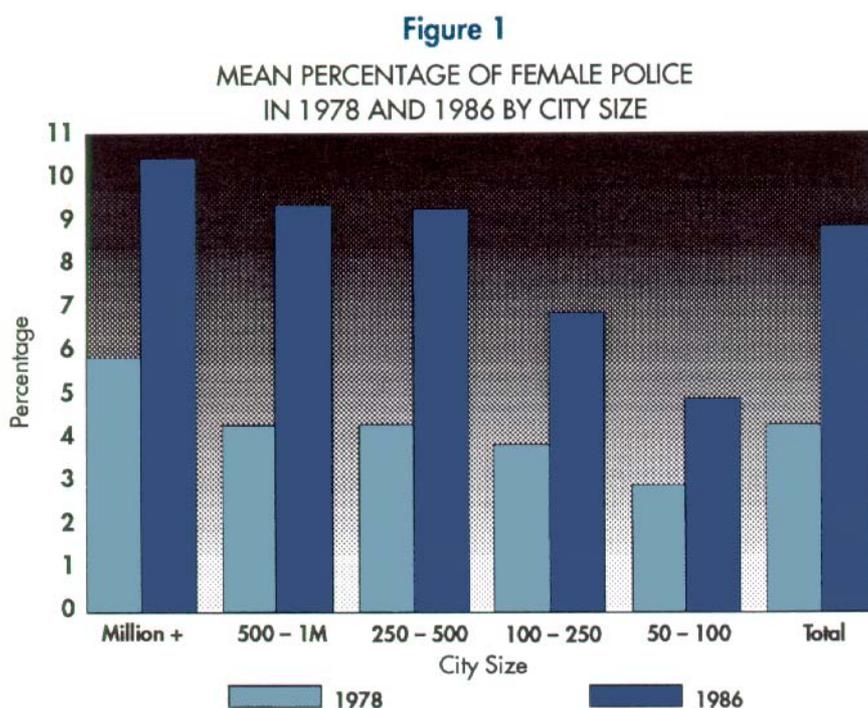


Figure 1 indicates that women's representation in policing in both 1978 and 1986 was directly related to city size. Although there has been growth in the proportion of women officers in cities of all sizes, the increase has been greater in departments in the largest cities. For example, in cities over a million, women made up 5.8 percent of the officers in 1978 and 10.4 percent in 1986; in cities of 50,000 to 100,000, they made up only 2.6 percent of the total in 1978 and 4.9 percent in 1986. In both years minority women made up a disproportionately large share of all women in policing—38 percent in 1978 and 40 percent in 1986. In contrast, minority men constituted 10 and 21 percent of all the male officers, respectively, in 1978 and 1986. Minority female representation was closely related to city size; white female representation was not.

Regional differences in the proportion of women in policing were small but related to variations in minority representation. Women constituted 7.6 percent of all officers in the west, where the proportion of minority women is the smallest, and 9.4 percent in the south, where the proportion of minority women is largest.

How one views the representation of women in policing depends on the standard one uses to measure it. Since women make up 44.7 percent of the labor force, it can be argued that they are underrepresented in policing. In addition, in contrast to traditionally "male" professions such as law and medicine, policing appears to be lagging. According to U.S. Department of Labor data, in May 1987, women made up 21 percent of the nation's lawyers and judges;

and 15 percent of the health diagnosing occupations.

In comparison with other skilled "blue collar" craft occupations, however, women in policing have done well; females made up only 4 percent of mechanics and repairers and 2 percent of workers in construction trades in May 1987 (U.S. Dept. of Labor cited by Powell, 1988:76-78).

Women in Supervisory Positions

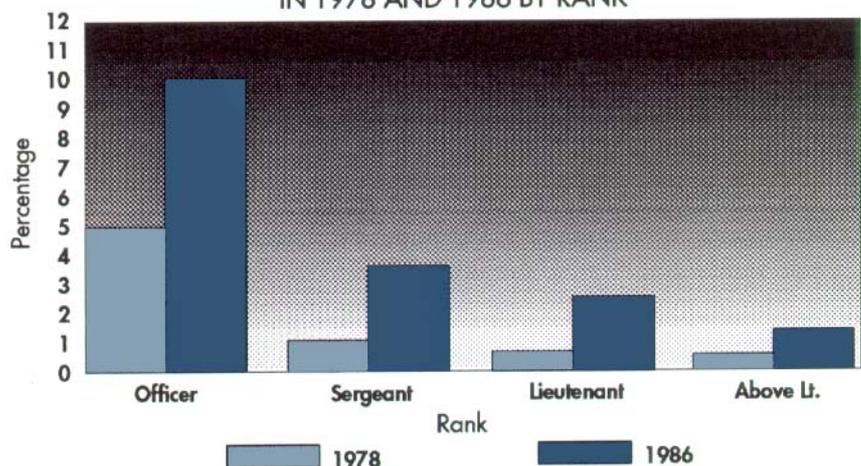
Although the proportion of women in supervisory ranks grew between 1978 and 1986, the increase was smaller than that in the rank of officer. In 1978, women made up one percent of municipal police supervisors, only 20 percent of whom were minority women. In 1986, women made up 3.3 percent of all supervisors, with 30 percent of these being minorities. While minority women continued to be underrepresented in supervisory ranks, they did make gains on white female counterparts.

The size of the jurisdiction studied in 1978 made little difference because women's representation was so uniformly small. In 1986, however, a higher proportion of women supervisors were found in agencies serving populations over 250,000 (4.0 percent) than those in the smaller cities (2.1 percent).

Most of the increase in female supervisors occurred at the rank of sergeant (Figure 2). In general, the higher the rank, the smaller the percentage of women in it. For example, the proportion of women among all officers, detectives and corporals increased from 5 percent in 1978 to 10 percent in 1986. The proportion of women sergeants among all sergeants increased from 1.0 to 3.7 percent; the proportion of women lieutenants from .7 to 2.5 percent; and the proportion of those in the higher ranking command staff from .5 to 1.4 percent. These differences are attributable in part to the fact that women have not been policing in significant numbers long enough to have shown up in the highest ranks. Nonetheless, their virtual exclusion from upper level management in police departments is similar to their near absence in corporate board rooms and law partnerships.⁴

Figure 2

PERCENTAGE OF FEMALE POLICE IN 1978 AND 1986 BY RANK



Data on the proportion of male and female officers eligible for promotion, promoted, or likely to be promoted in 1986, however, are somewhat more encouraging. As shown in Table 1, although 6.8 percent of all persons eligible for promotion to the rank of sergeant were female, 8.8 percent of those actually promoted were women; similarly, at the rank of lieutenant, women made up 2.7 percent of those eligible, but 3.5 percent of those actually promoted or likely to become lieutenants in 1986. Furthermore, across the various city size categories, with only one exception (agencies in cities with populations under 100,000), women were promoted in greater numbers than would be expected based on their representation in the eligible pools for sergeant and lieutenant.

Both the proportion of women eligible for promotion and the rate at which women were promoted were directly related to size of the city served; the larger the city, the higher the percentage. The biggest gains for women came in departments serving populations of over half a million, where women made up 9.5 percent of those eligible for promotion and 15.8 percent of those achieving the rank of sergeant in 1986.

Table 1
Women's Promotions in Municipal Departments by City Size

City Size	Sergeant		Lieutenant	
	Mean % Eligible (N=192)	Mean %Promoted (N=192)	Mean % Eligible (N=157)	Mean % Promoted (N=157)
>500,000	9.5	15.8	2.9	3.4
250,000-500,000	6.1	8.0	3.1	7.7
100,000-250,000	6.6	7.1	3.0	3.2
50,000-100,000	4.5	6.2	1.8	0.9
TOTAL	6.8	8.8	2.7	3.5

The low proportion of women in police supervisory positions can be explained by several factors. First, a smaller proportion of women are eligible for promotion due to service requirements. Among the 226 municipal agencies providing promotion data, 41 (18 percent) indicated that no women were eligible for promotion to sergeant in 1986; men were eligible for promotion in every case. Second, promotional systems that give substantial weight to seniority beyond minimal eligibility requirements limit women's promotional opportunities and actual promotion rates. While this lack of seniority still handicaps women, it is expected that in another decade the discriminatory effects of seniority will largely disappear (one possible exception being imbalances caused by higher turnover rates for women officers).

A third factor that seems to limit promotional opportunities for women is the supervisor's evaluation—considered for final placement on promotional lists in more than half the responding departments. Although job performance is a relevant consideration in a promotion system, effective measures of police performance have not been developed; most rating systems tend to be subjective, and as such may result in subtle downgrading of women who do not fit supervisors' conscious or unconscious definition of the ideal officer.

In agencies placing greater weight on objective measures, opportunities for moving into middle management increase. In fact, the percentage of eligible women promoted to sergeant was significantly higher in agencies using an assessment center as part of the promotional process (12.2 percent) than those that did not (4.9 percent).

Gender Differences in Officer Selection and Training

It has long been known that application and selection rates are influenced by eligibility criteria and mechanisms used to recruit, screen, and select candidate officers. For many years minimum height and weight standards greatly limited the pool of female applications (Milton, 1972; Sulton and Townsey, 1981).

In the past 15 years, however, these criteria have changed dramatically, thereby enlarging the pool of eligible women. By 1986, fewer than 4 percent of municipal departments still had minimum height (mean = 5' 4") and weight (mean = 135.3) standards. Instead, the use of physical fitness tests and standards making weight proportional to height are becoming the norm (Fyfe, 1986:5). Furthermore, women applicants in the past have often been found "unsatisfactory" as a result of oral interviews in which neither questions nor responses were standardized (Gray, 1975). In 1986, the Police Foundation found that 76 percent of the responding agencies

reported that they used standardized questions and 60 percent reported having predetermined acceptable answers.

Data on those who applied and were accepted for police jobs, and on those who entered and completed the training academy in municipal agencies, suggest that there is no systematic sex discrimination in the applicant selection process.

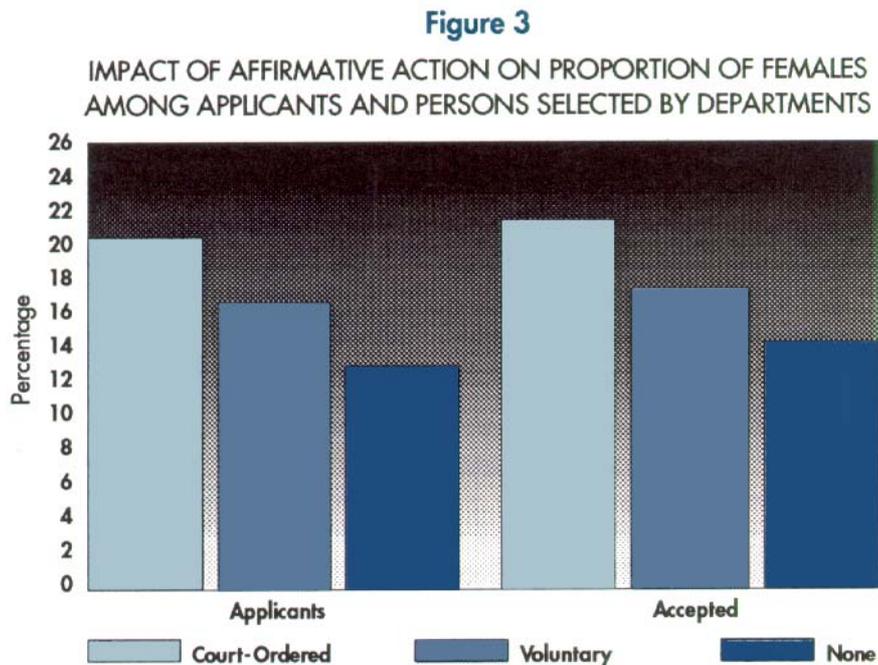
While 20 percent of the applicants were female, women comprised 20.6 percent of all those accepted by departments; 19.9 percent entering an academy; and 19.2 percent of those completing academy training. These data show that there are no significant gender differences in rates of offers of employment, or entry into and completing of the academy.⁵

A variety of factors were found to be related to the proportion of women among a department's applicants, accepted candidates, academy entrants, and new trainees. City size, for example, was directly related to each stage of selection. The proportion of women applicants in departments in cities over a million (29 percent) is more than twice the proportion in agencies in cities of 50,000 to 100,000 (13 percent). While the proportions of women accepted, entering the academy, and completing it also decreased substantially with city size, variation among departments in each size category was so great that the finding did not achieve statistical significance.

A breakdown by region suggests that there was a higher proportion of female applicants in the south and a smaller proportion in the northeast than in the north central and western states, but there were no significant regional differences in acceptance, academy entrance, or academy completion rates.

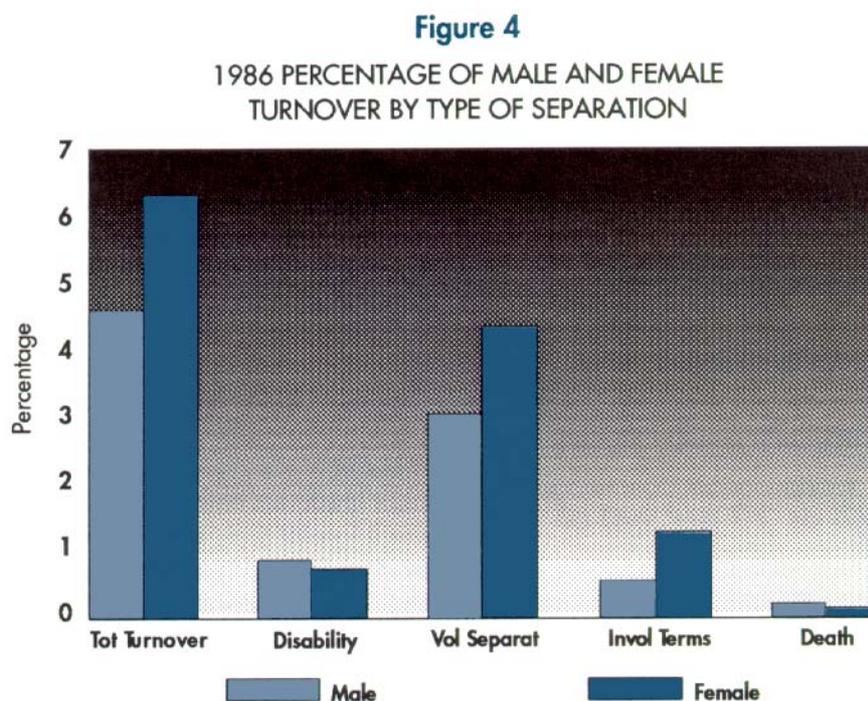
Among the selection criteria, the absence of a pre-training physical agility test was significantly associated with female application rates (19 percent versus 15 percent) and with female acceptance rates (22 percent versus 15 percent of those accepted).

A department's selection criteria and the presence and nature of its affirmative action policy also appear to have an impact on both the size of the female applicant pool and the number of female applicants accepted. Figure 3 shows that in agencies with court-ordered affirmative action plans, 21 percent of the applicants were female, in contrast to 17 percent in agencies with voluntary affirmative action plans, and 13 percent in those with no plan. Women also made up a significantly larger proportion of the applicants accepted in agencies with court-ordered affirmative action plans (21 percent), as compared to agencies with voluntary plans (18 percent) or no plans (14 percent).



Gender Differences in Turnover

Just as rates of entry into policing affect representation of women as a whole, so do turnover and separation rates. Figure 4 shows non-retirement turnover for males and females during 1986 and the four primary types of turnover, i.e., disability, voluntary separations, involuntary terminations, and death (but NOT normal retirement). During 1986, 6.3 percent of women officers and 4.6 percent of male officers separated from their departments. Although there were no gender differences in the rates of turnover due to disability or death, women had higher rates than men of both voluntary (4.3 percent versus 3.0 percent) and involuntary (1.2 versus .6 percent respectively) separations.



City size had virtually no relationship to turnover rates; women's turnover, however, was much lower in departments serving cities with populations over a million (4.2 percent) than in those serving smaller jurisdictions (7.8 percent). The factor most strongly associated with the female turnover rate was male turnover rate; where women tend to leave, men also are more likely to leave. Both male and female turnover was higher in the west than other regions.

A variety of factors related to women employees' slightly higher turnover rates may explain these findings (Kanter, 1977; O'Farrell and Harlan, 1982; Jurik, 1985). The association between male and female turnover rates suggests that departmental policies (such as willingness to eliminate trainees from the academy or during their probationary period) and local labor market conditions affect male and female officers in similar ways.

Some of the factors that probably do contribute to higher turnover rates for women include:

- a work environment that is hostile or unpleasant for women but not for men (Martin, 1980; Hunt, 1984);
- difficulties in meshing policing with family life (particularly for a single parent on rotating shifts);
- inadequate light duty and pregnancy leave policies that make having a family and continuing to work difficult or impossible;
- an unrealistically positive picture of the work acquired from television or from recruiters seeking to meet goals; and
- the problems, e.g. performance pressures, faced by "tokens" (Kanter, 1977).

Because of the nature of police patrol, most police agencies permit or require pregnant officers to leave patrol assignments. Yet only 74 percent of the agencies reassign a pregnant officer to a light duty assignment until delivery; 14 percent force the woman to go on leave when she can no longer continue in her "normal" assignment. Twelve percent of the agencies had not yet had to deal with a pregnancy. It is likely that many of the women

forced to leave policing for six to eight months in order to have a child resign temporarily or permanently from their departments.

Impact of Affirmative Action

Affirmative action policies have a major impact not only on the rates at which females apply and enter policing, but, over the long term, on women's overall representation in policing. In 1986, 15 percent of the municipal agencies responding to our survey had court-ordered affirmative action hiring policies; 42 percent had voluntary affirmative action plans in effect; and 43 percent had none.

In those agencies under court order to increase the representation of women and minorities, women made up 10.1 percent of the sworn personnel in 1986; in those with voluntary affirmative action plans, women made up 8.3 percent of the personnel, and in those without affirmative action plans women constituted only 6.1 percent of the personnel.

Affirmative action also is related to the proportion of women in supervisory positions; in departments with court-ordered affirmative action, women made up 3.5 percent of the supervisors; in those with voluntary affirmative action 2.4 percent; and in those without affirmative action 2.2 percent of the supervisory personnel.

Because the representation of women and presence of affirmative action policies were also related to other factors, the Police Foundation study used multivariate analysis to control for the effects of size, region, minority representation, and the proportion of women officers in 1978 to determine whether affirmative action policies have an independent effect. After including these variables in several regression models, we found that both court-ordered and voluntary affirmative action remained significantly associated with the proportion of women in a department in 1986 and that the presence of an affirmative action policy also was significantly associated with an increase in the representation of female officers over the 8-year period.

Because several factors also were found to be related to application and acceptance rates, researchers conducted a similar multivariate analysis to isolate the effects of affirmative action. For each test, two regression models, identical except that the second one omitted the affirmative action variables, were developed and compared (Namboodiri, Carter, and Blalock, 1975).⁶

Although we found that both court-ordered and voluntary affirmative action remained significantly associated with female application rates, after controlling for the other variables neither was found to be significantly related to the proportion of female applicants accepted for employment. This suggests that affirmative action policies make a favorable impact on recruitment, primarily in widening the applicant pool; but once that is enlarged, women are usually selected in proportion to their presence in that pool. If current selection procedures continue, women will eventually make up as much as 20 percent of police personnel. If the proportion of women is to increase beyond that, however, recruiting efforts to encourage more female applicants to enter the applicant pool may be required.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

The survey findings suggest that there has been some positive change in the status of women in policing in the past decade. The proportion of female officers has increased in police departments in each population category and geographic region. By the end of 1986, women made up nearly 9 percent of officers in municipal departments in cities over 50,000. This has occurred despite federal efforts to weaken affirmative action programs, which are found in more than half the agencies responding to the survey and are associated with the increased female representation.

The *pace* of change is, nonetheless, relatively slow; women still constitute less than 9 percent of all police personnel and 3.3 percent at the supervisory level. They thus continue to face the problems experienced by "tokens," e.g. performance pressures, heightened boundaries against "outsiders," and entrapment in stereotyped roles (Kanter, 1977).

Recruitment, selection, retention, and promotion rates paint an equivocal picture regarding women's status in police work. About 20 percent of both the current applicants and recruits are female, which suggests that once women apply, there does not seem to be systematic discrimination against them. There is wide variation among departments, however, in both application and acceptance rates. This points to the fact that some agencies attract women and others do not, leaving considerable room for more effective recruitment efforts. Such efforts

are particularly important because women have higher turnover rates than men, and thus more women are needed to enter policing even to maintain current gender ratios.

Although women are being promoted at a rate slightly higher than might be expected based on their proportion among those eligible, current trends would indicate that women are not likely to assume departmental leadership and policymaking positions for many years in more than a handful of agencies.

What policies do these findings suggest for the next decade?

- Since affirmative action policies have substantially changed the composition of the larger departments, it is important to see that such policies are adopted where they are absent and continued where they exist.
- Voluntary affirmative action hiring policies should focus on enlargement of the pool of recruits. This will permit selection of more and better qualified women, while avoiding imposition of court-ordered changes in hiring procedures that cause a backlash of resentment.
- To increase the rate of female promotion, departments need to alter promotion standards to eliminate criteria irrelevant to identifying supervisory ability or potential. They need to adopt policies and procedures which clearly state that promotions are based on merit.
- Increasing the number of women in recruitment and training assignments as well as in high visibility supervisory posts will create more role models for both potential recruits and women already on the job.
- The adoption of a pregnancy policy permitting pregnant women to remain on the job in a non-contact assignment and allowing new mothers to take leave beyond the brief period needed for physical recovery, would also have a salutary effect.

Endnotes

- 1 Several early studies indicated that women can perform effectively as patrol officers (Bloch and Anderson, 1974; Sherman, 1975; Sichel et al., 1978) and identified the problems and coping strategies of the first generation of women assigned to patrol work (Martin, 1980). More recent surveys of personnel practices (Fyfe, 1987; Sulton and Townsey, 1981) have found continuing changes in police agency selection criteria but lack information on changes in selection and promotion practices and turnover rates. For a critique of these early evaluations, see Morash and Greene (1986); for a discussion of the shortcomings of statistical information, see Walker (1985).
- 2 We subsequently discovered that the 1986 sample included all departments in Sulton and Townsey's 1978 survey, as well as 50 departments that they did not include. Forty-one of these departments were in the 50,000 to 100,000 size category in 1986 but previously had fewer than 50,000 inhabitants. The other nine were larger departments, six of which appear to have been used for a pretest.
- 3 Sulton and Townsey obtained usable surveys from 74 percent of the municipal agencies.
- 4 In 1985 only 2 percent of the top corporate executives of Fortune 500 companies were women (Powell, 1988:75) and 6 percent of law firm partners were women according to a study conducted by the ABA's Commission on Women in the Profession.
- 5 Because in many jurisdictions, county or municipal personnel boards administer the initial entry test and "certify" qualified applicants from a list ranked by written exam score, only 60 percent of the departments were able to provide data on the number of applicants; in contrast, 72 percent provided data on academy entrance and completion. Several departments that did not provide the latter information indicated that no officers had been hired or completed training in 1986.
- 6 Both models included as independent variables agency size, region, percent black, percent Hispanic, percent female, whether the agency had increased its authorized sworn personnel since 1982, whether women had been assigned to patrol prior to 1974, the total percentage of applicants accepted, whether the agency uses a pre-training agility test, and whether there is either female or minority representation on the oral panel.

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About the Police Foundation

The Police Foundation is a private, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting innovation and improvement in policing. Established in 1970, the foundation has conducted seminal research in police behavior, policy, and procedure, and works to transfer to local agencies the best information about practices for dealing effectively with a range of important police operational and administrative concerns.

Our purpose is to help the police be more effective in doing their job, whether it be deterring robberies, intervening in potentially injurious domestic disputes, or working to improve relationships between the police and the communities they serve. To accomplish our mission, we work closely with police officers and police departments across the country, and it is in their hard work and contributions that our accomplishments are rooted.

The foundation has done much of the research that led to a questioning of the traditional model of professional law enforcement and toward a new view of policing—one emphasizing a community orientation. As a partner in the Community Policing Consortium, the foundation, along with four other leading national law enforcement organizations, plays a principal role in the development of community policing research, training, and technical assistance.

The foundation's Institute for Integrity, Leadership, and Professionalism in Policing (IILPP) helps police departments to acquire both the knowledge gained through research and the tools needed to integrate that knowledge into police practices. Working with law enforcement agencies seeking to improve accountability, performance, service delivery, and community satisfaction with police services, the IILPP offers a wide range of assessment, technology, training, education, certification, management, and human resources services.

The foundation has developed two state-of-the-art technologies to enable police agencies to systematically collect and analyze a wide range of performance-related data. The RAMS™II (The Risk Analysis Management System) is an early warning device that helps agencies manage and minimize risk. The QSI™ (Quality of Service Indicator) collects and analyzes officer-citizen contacts, including traffic stop data. Both The RAMS™II and the QSI™ produce detailed reports to assist police managers in making critical personnel and operational decisions.

The foundation's state-of-the-art Crime Mapping Laboratory (CML) works to advance the understanding of computer mapping and to pioneer new applications of computer mapping. The CML provides training and technical assistance to police agencies seeking to incorporate mapping technologies and applications into their crime analysis and patrol operations.

Other foundation projects are also directed at the improvement of policing. For example, the foundation has helped to create independent organizations dedicated to the advancement of policing, including the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives (NOBLE), and the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF).

Motivating all of the foundation's efforts is the goal of efficient, effective, humane policing that operates within the framework of democratic principles and the highest ideals of the nation.



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