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EXAMINING THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN POLICE LEADERS IN ILLINOIS

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Examining the Experiences of Women Police Leaders in Illinois

Emilee Green

Center for Justice Research and Evaluation
Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority

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Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority
300 West Adams, Suite 200
Chicago, Illinois 60606
Phone: 312.793.8550
Fax: 312.793.8422
www.icjia.state.il.us

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Research indicates women are strong assets to police departments, performing similarly to men in arrest decision-making and coercive force (Feder, 1997; Paoline & Terrill, 2004) while using less excessive force and becoming involved in fewer lawsuits and payouts (Bergman et al., 2016; Lonsway et al., 2002). The presence of female officers in a police department may influence community policing strategies and engender communication and conflict resolution (Aiello, 2020; Strobl, 2020). However, despite strides in hiring made during the 1980s and 1990s, women remain severely underrepresented in policing, comprising just 10-13% of the country's active-duty police officers (Langton, 2010) and only 1-3% of chiefs (Hyland & Davis, 2019; Schulz, 2002). These percentages have remained stagnant throughout the 2000s, prompting questions into what has caused the stall. Studies show women encounter numerous barriers when attempting to enter the male-dominated field of policing, ranging from exclusionary physical fitness standards (Schulze, 2012) to restrictive appearance requirements (Kringen & Novich, 2018), sexual harassment, and social exclusion (Rabe-Hemp, 2008).

For women who pursue leadership positions, this resistance may escalate. Women police leaders may encounter harsher criticisms than their male counterparts and be viewed as less competent (Brescoll et al., 2010). In addition, many women are expected to tend to their spouses and children at home—referred to in literature as the "irresolvable conflict"—which can deter them from considering promotion (Silvestri, 2006).

To add to the growing body of research, I interviewed six Illinois women police leaders (rank of captain and above) to learn about their experiences and journeys in rising through the ranks. I conducted phone interviews to collect information on their demographics and career experiences. Research questions included:

- What are the experiences of women police leaders in Illinois?
- What are challenges that women police officers and leaders encounter?
- How can women be encouraged to join the profession?
- What advice is there for future women police leaders?

Findings

Entry into Law Enforcement

Research suggests police work stereotypes (e.g., violent, dangerous) can deter women from wanting to enter the profession, so I inquired how these women became interested despite these perceptions. The women interviewed had many reasons for joining the police force, including the financial aspects and the benefits of a structured career. However, most pointed to a familial role model who helped them develop a positive outlook toward policing by highlighting the service aspect of the profession.

Testing. When pursuing a career in law enforcement, many tests are used to determine whether a person is fit to be a police officer, including a written exam, polygraph test,

psychological exam, oral interview, and physical fitness test. Upper body strength cutoffs in the physical fitness test can create a barrier for women who want to enter policing. In Illinois, the physical fitness test has different standards for men and women along its various measurements (e.g., sit and reach, sit-ups, bench press, 1.5 mile run). The majority of interviewees did not feel the fitness test was representative of what was needed to perform police work; however, they noted the test can be a good indicator of an officer's future physical health.

The Police Academy. Once the recruits pass the tests necessary to become an officer, they enter the police academy. The women in this study generally stated the police academy was fair and rewarded hard work. Excelling physically and mentally was praised by instructors and provided the women with positive feedback. Overall, the interviewees felt positively about their experiences in the academy and felt supported in their journeys to become officers, though some acknowledged much of policing is learned on the job.

Experience as Police Officers

Some officers reported that they were met with resistance and harassment upon joining the force in the 1990s and early 2000s. They said male officers occasionally made direct, critical comments regarding their physical strength and capabilities, whereas other times, the distrust of their abilities was more implied, such as only being assigned to stereotypically female assignments (e.g., crimes against children, sex crimes). The officers said as they were being harassed, often by a specific subset of older male officers, they feared it would be detrimental to report the behavior and would result in social exclusion or retaliation. Many women said they had to work "twice as hard to prove half as much" as their male colleagues. However, they also indicated they were often driven by others' negativity. Using this doubt as motivation, the women pursued education, training, and administrative work experience. As their careers progressed, the women said speaking up against harassment became easier and was the fastest way to stop negative behaviors.

Pursuing Promotion

With education and training that boosted their resumes and expanded their skillsets, this group of interviewees became interested in, and well-prepared for, promotion. Through their time in policing, they learned about the different officer specializations (e.g., investigations, firearms, K-9, SWAT) and diversity of law enforcement careers. Promotions felt like an opportunity to eventually enact policy changes they wished to see in their departments.

For some, the promotional process was relatively smooth and perceived as fair to both men and women officers. For others, promotions seemingly occurred based upon relationships and trust built outside of the organization (e.g., through camping or fishing trips, Little League sports). Even when they deserved promotion, the women were sometimes passed over in favor of male peers. Some of the interviewees found the promotional process challenging, but all persevered and eventually achieved higher ranks. Some interviewees left police departments for positions at departments more open to placing women in leadership positions. Some women reported experiencing backlash upon becoming serious contenders for promotion. While they noted that men who received coveted promotions also received backlash, the women encountered certain

gendered assumptions, such as that they had been promoted because they were sleeping with senior officers or that they were only promoted because they were women.

Experience as Police Leaders

All women participants had been promoted to high ranks during their careers. In their interviews, the women said they displayed resiliency and knew that being leaders would come with challenges, but being leaders allowed them to serve as better role models and enact departmental organizational change. In their leadership positions, the women said they valued open and honest communication with both their officers and persons involved with the justice system and take time to build relationships within their communities and listen to citizen feedback.

Coping with Stress

The women used multiple methods to cope with the stressors of being women police leaders. All recognized the importance of self-care and engaged in multiple hobbies for their own mental health. Physical exercise was commonly brought up as one coping method, as policing in administrative positions can be rather sedentary. Supportive relationships were the other major cornerstone of self-care for the interviewees. Friendships with other women officers allowed them to network, gain new perspectives on challenging situations, and share advice. The women emphasized the importance of choosing a supportive partner, as unsupportive spouses who had trouble dealing with the demands and challenges of law enforcement created additional stress during the promotional process.

Recruitment and Future Directions

The interviewees said perceptions of women police officers have steadily improved since they entered law enforcement. They said today's newest recruits "don't even bat an eye" at a woman in a leadership position, as many were raised with mothers who were in the workforce. In addition, the leaders reported they had great relationships with the officers in their departments. Despite this, recruiting women for policing was noted as a major challenge. The women suggested focusing on the service aspect of the profession to attract new recruits, as that is what got them interested in becoming officers. They also suggested creating recruitment videos featuring women officers both on and off the job. These videos could show potential recruits the wide range of specializations offered in law enforcement (outside of patrol), while off the job clips could inform them that a career in policing still allows free time for family and hobbies.

Recommendations

Based on the interviews, the following recommendations are suggested to address barriers women face in entering and being promoted in policing.

Offer Mentorship for Women Officers

Many of the interviewees emphasized the importance of having friendships and support from other women officers, as these relationships provide invaluable guidance and perspectives. While

there are organizations and conferences that bring together women officers, such as the National Association of Women Law Enforcement Executives, some of the interviewees noted that some officers are unaware of these organizations and that funding may restrict the number of officers who can attend. State and local coalitions of women officers should be nurtured and made more accessible to women officers. As receiving honest feedback and advice was important to the interviewees, these organizations could offer support and encouragement to other women officers who may not have high-ranking women in their own departments for mentorship.

Prepare Women Officers for Promotion

During the interviews, several women described escalating negative behavior toward them once they were serious contenders for promotion. While they reported attitudes toward women police officers seem to be less discriminatory than in the past, more work must be done, particularly for women pursuing and attaining leadership positions, where they are perceived as more threatening to the status quo. The women interviewed also suggested that officers seeking promotion should pursue training and education to enhance their skillsets, as they did. The women shared that operational, managerial, and communication skills were valued and necessary for their positions. Preparing for negative feedback and relying on personal support systems may be important in departments that are more resistant to women in law enforcement.

Employ Supportive Police Department Policies

Women should support each other and practice self-care, but there also needs to be organizational change within police departments. The burden of responding to negative work environments should not be solely the responsibility of women officers. Police management should ensure departmental policies and training are in place to prevent and address harassment based on gender identity, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

Police departments should also develop clear policies around the promotional process. The interviewees indicated a perception that women are only promoted as part of diversity initiatives, which created increased animosity toward women who pursue and achieve promotions they deserve. Therefore, departments should create objective criteria for selecting promotional candidates. The criteria should be developed using a diverse group of both officers and the public and posted publicly so all officers are aware of how scores are tallied (National Center for Women & Policing, n.d.). Police departments should also collect data on law enforcement applicants, as well as those pursuing and receiving promotions, to identify and address underrepresentation.

Use Recruitment Methods to Engage Underrepresented Populations in Policing

Some of the interviewees indicated that their departments did not use any sort of targeted recruitment strategies to attract underrepresented populations, including women, to law enforcement. During the interviews, the women noted their motivation to join and remain in the policing field was a love of helping people. Recruitment strategies highlighting the service aspect of policing may attract women. However, research has also indicated that these strategies may not be enough to counter public distrust and a negative perception of police legitimacy. Police

departments should recruit persons representative of their communities and be open to feedback on improving relationships with the community. Leadership should also be careful to not place unrealistic pressure on underrepresented individuals to transform the culture of policing entirely.

Section 1: Introduction

Women comprise approximately half of the U.S. population, but they are not represented as such in both the rank-and-file and leadership roles in law enforcement. Despite increases in hiring in the 1980s and 1990s, the proportion of women officers in the police force stagnated throughout much of the 2000s at around 10% to 13% (Langton, 2010). Women police chiefs are even less common at 1-3% (Archbold & Hassell, 2009). Research shows that women can be strong assets to police departments that want to improve community relations and reduce the severity of use of force incidents, as women officers may be less cynical in their view of citizens and more likely to value the principles of community policing than men (Hoffman & Hickey, 2005; Miller, 1998; National Center for Women & Policing, n.d.). However, many women face challenges to their existence in police work and encounter barriers at each step of their careers, which can drive them away from the profession (Schuck, 2014).

Previous research has suggested multiple reasons as to why barriers occur. In general, inherently masculine traits, such as strength and aggression, have been commonly associated with police work; in contrast, feminine traits, such as nurturing and empathy, have been viewed as less important or even harmful in policing (Roberg et al., 2015). As such, policing has been perceived as an environment hostile to women and this has deterred women from both joining and continuing careers as police officers (Cordner & Cordner, 2011).

In becoming police leaders, women officers experience similar challenges as women in other industries (Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010; Orser et al., 2012). The "glass ceiling" and gender stereotypes influence the roles that women are expected to take, particularly in male-dominated professions (Jauhar & Lau, 2018). Women who still choose to pursue leadership positions may experience intimidation and exclusion that reduces their social support and inhibits further career progression (Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016). In spite of these obstacles, women throughout the country have attained leadership status within police departments. As more women emerge as leaders in this area, their expertise and ability to enact change will be integral in creating work environments that support and encourage other women (Haile et al., 2016). However, despite laws that protect against discrimination based on gender identity, departments still struggle to effectively recruit women to their ranks.

Previous studies have identified the difficulties for women in entering policing, pursuing promotion, and being perceived as competent leaders in their departments. To add to this growing body of research, women police leaders across Illinois were interviewed for a study on their experiences as they rose through the ranks. This study's research questions included:

- What are the experiences of women police leaders in Illinois?
- What challenges do women police officers and leaders encounter?
- How can women be encouraged to join the profession?
- What advice is there for future women police leaders?

Also discussed are recruitment, retention, and promotion of women in law enforcement. While this study primarily focuses on women, it is recognized that other groups, such as persons of color and persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) are also underrepresented in law enforcement, and women who are part of these groups may face additional barriers (Couto, 2018; Peterson & Uhnoo, 2012).

Section 2: Literature Review

Historically, women have faced resistance to their entry in policing and continue to be underrepresented in modern departments in both patrol and administration (Prenzler & Sinclair, 2013). Critics believe that women may be too weak or too unwilling to use force to be good police officers (Seklecki & Paynich, 2007). However, research shows that women often approach policing similarly to their men counterparts with comparable patrol performance (based on ratings from supervisors) (Sichel et al., 1978) and arrest decision-making (Feder, 1997). One study indicated that women officers may also be less likely to use excessive force (Lonsway et al., 2002). As such, women officers tend to be involved in fewer lawsuits and payouts, which can save money for departments and taxpayers (Bergman et al., 2016).

Women officers can also bring specific skillsets to policing, perhaps due to differences in socialization between men and women. For example, women may be socialized to place more importance on communication skills, which can benefit team-building within a department (Oliver & Lagucki, 2012). Schuck and Rabe-Hemp (2005) found that female officers were more likely than male officers to engage in underpredicted policing (i.e., using less force than a situation would normally predict), but this was not related to officer injury. While gender may not predict officer performance or de-escalation skills, the mere presence of women on the force can bring organizational change and alternative policing strategies that benefit citizens and officers of both genders (Resetnikova, 2006; Schuck, 2017). This type of transformational change may be critical to police departments looking to re-establish legitimacy and trust within their communities. However, researchers have also emphasized that future studies must examine the specific ways in which increasing women representation can affect organizational change (Brown & Silvestri, 2019).

Community policing was developed to create partnerships between police officers and citizens (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1994; Diamond & Weiss, 2009; Peyton et al., 2019). This policing strategy focuses on creating a collaborative environment, altering the structure of law enforcement to use proactive (as opposed to reactive) problem solving and using systematic examination of problems in the community to identify and evaluate responses (Community Oriented Policing Services, 2014). Research has shown that community policing can enhance police legitimacy, improve citizen satisfaction, and potentially reduce certain types of crime (Gill et al., 2014). Women officers, who may view citizens with more empathy and can engender more cooperation, may be critical assets to departments looking to implement community policing strategies (Lonsway, 2000). Though this does not mean male officers cannot or do not utilize community policing, an analysis from Aiello (2020) found that agencies with higher female representation have increased use of community policing tactics, including recruitment strategies focused on service and engagement.

Women on the police force can also bring about positive change for other officers. Departments with more women may offer better childcare, light duty[1], and sick leave policies, which benefit anyone with children and those who need time off for medical reasons (Prussel & Lonsway,

[1] "Light duty" refers to a modified set of police duties for individuals that may be injured, pregnant, or otherwise unable to perform the full extent of police responsibilities. Assignments on light duty may include shorter shifts and more administrative work, but specific duties may vary based upon the needs of the department.

2001). Family policies and strong work-life balance are often important to younger generations (Bannon et al., 2011; Wallace, 2018), so these benefits may be critical for departments looking to recruit young, new officers of any gender.

Barriers for Women in Policing

Despite evidence that shows women can play a positive role in policing, a lack of growth in the percentage of women officers indicates departments may not be doing enough to recruit and retain women (Cordner & Cordner, 2011). Simply getting women interested in policing may be more difficult due to the field's inherent dangerousness (Bushway, 2006; Huey & Ricciardelli, 2015). Exclusionary testing, academy barriers, appearance requirements (e.g., uniforms, hairstyles), and sexual harassment can also deter women from careers in policing.

Recruitment

A challenge that many departments encounter is recruiting women for police work. Cordner and Cordner (2011) surveyed men chiefs and women officers to find out why women may not be interested in policing. A higher percentage of men chiefs (79%) than women officers (64%) reported that women had employment options that were more appealing. However, women officers were more likely to indicate that police agencies were not woman-friendly (45%) compared to men chiefs (7%). Reasons included the perception that women are only hired for their looks, that advancement opportunities for women are limited, and a lack of family-friendly departmental policies. However, some women are drawn to policing for the same reasons that men are (e.g., excitement, well-paying salary), meaning recruitment strategies must be multi-faceted. Finally, many jurisdictions fail to proactively recruit women (Garcia, 2003).

Appearance Requirements

Some women who are interested in policing may dislike the lack of personal expression allowed due to strict rules on personal appearance. These rules are enforced upon entry into the police academy (Anne Arundel County Police Department, 2019). In one study, women discussed the difficulty in cutting their hair short for the academy (Kringen & Novich, 2018). Many had long hair their entire lives and viewed it as an essential part of how they expressed their femininity. Hair may also carry particular significance for Black women, and strict appearance requirements can be one reason, among many, that Black women choose not to apply (Kringen & Novich, 2018). Women who question or reject appearance rules may be criticized by both men and women officers for failing to assimilate (Kringen & Novich, 2018).

Physical Fitness Standards

Though police work is mostly sedentary (Ramey et al., 2014), officers may be called upon to give chase, carry the injured, or climb obstacles. Therefore, a physical fitness test is typically required to become a police officer in most departments (Breci, 2005). Studies have shown that police physical fitness tests may use measures that are not reflective of actual police work, excluding some women in the process (American Civil Liberties Union, n.d.; Arvey et al., 1992). For example, one study found that upper body strength tests (e.g., push-ups, pull-ups, body

drags, bench press) comprise a significant portion of police testing, despite officers reporting that police activities more commonly resemble stairclimbing and squatting (Birzer & Craig, 1996). Despite a lack of scientific research validating the applicability of certain physical measures, women (and men) who do not meet arbitrary cut-offs for upper body strength may not be given the opportunity to become officers, even if they potentially possess other interpersonal skills that benefit policing (Schulze, 2012).

The Police Academy

Once recruits pass their initial physical test, oral interviews, written tests, and psychological exams, they enter the police academy for the additional training needed to become a police officer. The requirements of police academies can vary by state and department level (e.g., local, federal). The police academy often takes four to six months to complete and involves both classroom and physical components. Recruits study the law, investigations, combat, firearms, tactical driving, computer techniques, and other skills needed to become an officer. Recruits are also required to stay in shape and may be asked to pass another physical test before graduation.

Some women encounter resistance as they graduate from the academy and seek to enter law enforcement. In one study, Prokos and Padavic (2002) found that women in the police academy were often regarded as outsiders; that men officers were considered the norm and women should thus be treated differently (i.e., as fragile); and that women instructors were not given as much respect as men instructors, having their authority frequently questioned or ignored. As noted in Rabe-Hemp (2008), “the training academy and field experiences appear to be the first line of defense to stop ‘the female invasion’” (p. 265).

Sexual Harassment

Research shows approximately one-half to three quarters of women police officers have been subjected to some level of sexual harassment (Chaiyavej & Morash, 2008; Collins, 2004; Lonsway et al., 2013). Sexual harassment may take the form of hostility, unwanted attention, relentless offers for dates, affectionate terms of address (e.g., calling a woman officer “sweetheart”), jokes, or touching. Though research suggests its regularity has lessened since women entered patrol, women officers continue to report experiences of harassment from both persons involved in the justice system and other officers (Shelley et al., 2011). Women leaders of color may be even more likely to experience sexual harassment (Cortina et al., 2013; McLaughlin et al., 2012). Women officers have reported these experiences significantly decrease job satisfaction and influence resignation from police work (Haarr, 2005; Harrison, 2012; Texeira, 2002). Some women are “tested” on their responses to harassment by their male peers and those who formally complain may experience retaliation or exclusion (Haarr & Morash, 2013). Retaliation can range from poor evaluations to even a denial of backup in emergency situations (Lonsway et al., 2013).

Women as Leaders in Policing

While some women have long, successful careers as police officers, new barriers arise for women interested in advancement, including few opportunities for promotion and bureaucratic or political barriers.

Policing is highly hierarchical and para-militaristic in nature, with opportunities for promotion few and far between—it can take an officer five to 10 years to receive their first supervisory promotion (Roufa, 2019). Similarly to other careers, the promotion process can be stressful, biased, and sometimes timing-based depending on which positions need filling and the level of funding available (Archbold & Schulz, 2008). These challenges pose an additional burden to women officers, especially those dealing with harassment and discrimination.

Some women police are not interested in promotion, and some may like their work shift or enjoy patrol more than administrative work. But in one study of women police officers, the officers described a lack of confidence in their experience despite having the necessary qualifications (Archbold & Hassell, 2009). Other officers felt women were automatically promoted and women officers did not want to be considered promoted by default (Archbold & Hassell, 2009).

Women in policing also report complications related to work-life balance. In one study, high-ranking policewomen described the challenge of working a full shift and still being responsible for cooking, cleaning, and childcare (Silvestri, 2006). Despite this, the women said working less or asking for more time off would be viewed as a lack of commitment (Silvestri, 2006). The women indicated that regardless of social expectations, the responsibility of being a police leader demands a full commitment (Silvestri, 2006).

These challenges must be addressed, as police departments can strongly benefit from having women in leadership positions. For example, women police leaders can help create lasting organizational change in departments. Silvestri (2007) found that women police are more likely to employ a transformational style of leadership, relying on open communication, democracy, and interpersonal skills when developing a leadership strategy, as opposed to using control and authority. Women also offered more transparency and openness around departmental policies or disagreements. While other officers may have viewed this strategy as “weak,” the women viewed this type of leadership as an improvement on the relationships among officers in their departments, as well as with the community (Silvestri, 2007).

Having police leadership who are reflective of the communities they serve may also help to improve confidence in the police and the government. Though simply having gender and racial representation are not enough to fully repair the relationship between the public and the police, increasing diversity within law enforcement agencies—through not only gender and race, but sexual orientation, religion, language, and background—can be an early step in helping citizens view law enforcement as fair and responsive to community concerns (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2016).

Section 3: Methodology

In this study, I conducted interviews to explore the experiences of Illinois women actively serving as police leaders in their departments. This study documents the women's extensive knowledge and personal experiences as they rose through the ranks and informs future recruitment and retention strategies for women in policing. This study was approved by the ICJIA Institutional Review Board.

Sampling and Procedure

Women police leaders were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. First, I engaged the Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police, the National Association of Women Law Enforcement Executives, and the Illinois Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board. Representatives of these organizations were emailed inquiring about their knowledge of Illinois' women police leaders. Internet searches revealed publicly available contact information for leaders identified, including phone numbers and emails. Approximately 20 women leaders were emailed three times over the course of several weeks requesting participation in a telephone interview.

The final sample consisted of six women with police ranks of captain or higher. Due to the relatively small sample of participants, semi-structured interviews were used to glean as much information as possible from the participants surrounding their experiences in law enforcement. The interview protocol contained 23 questions on the women's demographics; entry into policing and early career experiences; challenges and coping; promotional experience; relationships with their peers; and recruitment and promotional advice. Interviews ranged from 35 to 75 minutes, with a mean length of 54 minutes.

All six women interviewed were married and had children. Most were White, but race is not shared to protect anonymity of interview subjects. Table 1 offers additional demographics.

Table 1

Demographics of Interviewed Women Police Leaders (N = 6)

	n (%)
Age in years	
Mean (SD)	46.17 (5.85)
Minimum-Maximum	39.0-56.0
Highest level of education	
Bachelor's degree	2 (33.3)
Post-graduate degree	4 (66.6)
Children's age in years	
Minimum-Maximum	8.0-42.0
Years in title	
Mean (SD)	5.33 (4.50)
Minimum-Maximum	1.0-11.0
Years as officer	

Table 1 (continued).

Mean (SD)	22.17 (5.98)
Minimum-Maximum	15.0-32.0
Work area	
Urban or Suburban	4 (66.6)
Rural	2 (33.3)

Note. Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.

Analysis

All interviews were conducted over the phone and audio recorded with permission. The resulting audio data was transcribed in Microsoft Word and analyzed in QSR NVivo 9. I used a deductive coding process to develop general codes that reflected the research questions. These initial codes covered the themes of early experiences, challenges, recruitment, and police culture, with additional sub-codes added, as needed. For the sake of clarity and confidentiality, individual quotes will be attributed to interviewees based on pseudonyms.

As with all research, this study had its limitations. First, the sample only comprised officers with uninterrupted careers in law enforcement, as opposed to those who eventually dropped out or pursued other professions. Therefore, this study does not draw from women who left the field of policing. Further, as there were only six interviewees, the sample may not be representative of all women police leaders' experiences in Illinois or elsewhere. Finally, interviews were recorded and analyzed by a single researcher. Researcher consensus on theme structure was not sought.

Section 4: Findings

The career experiences of those sampled varied. Some women interviewed had relatively smooth experiences in law enforcement, whereas others faced immense barriers and serious resistance to their entry into, and promotions within, policing.

Entry into Law Enforcement

The majority of interviewees became interested in policing due to a close relationship with a police officer while growing up. Four of the women had family members involved in law enforcement or the military. Through these connections, the women developed positive outlooks toward policing, as expressed by two women here:

> *Melanie*: "I had an uncle that I looked up to like a father, and he worked for [police department] and eventually became the chief of police there before he died…I always looked up to him. So, it was just a profession that I kind of gravitated to."
>
> *Rachel*: "Part of the reason I became interested at an early age…was the helping…one of my earliest memories, you know, my dad told me to stay in the car, and then he would go onto the side of the road and help somebody who got into an accident…so I remember thinking that everybody keeps driving by but you…they [the police] are the ones who stop to help."

Their other reasons for entering the profession included financial benefits, such as tuition reimbursement, and enjoying physical fitness and discipline. For many of these women, the opportunity to help and protect people—as modeled by their family members—was a major draw to entering law enforcement.

Police Officer Testing

Prior to acceptance into the police academy, a multitude of tests are used to determine a person's fitness for the role of police recruit. These tests often include a written exam involving English, math, and writing; an oral interview; a polygraph test; a psychological exam; and a physical fitness exam. To measure their physical strength, many of the women were tested using the Illinois Peace Officer Wellness Evaluation Report (POWER test). The POWER test includes a sit and reach test, one-minute sit-up test, one repetition maximum bench press, and 1.5 mile run. In addition, some of the women scaled walls or completed timed body drags as part of their physical exams. The POWER test uses different standards for men and women. To gauge upper body strength, young men (ages 20-29) are required to bench press 98% of their body weight; young women are required to press 58% of their body weight. Men must run faster and complete more sit ups than the women. Women must sit and reach further.

Though all of the interviewees emphasized the importance of physical fitness, most indicated the test was not representative of actual police work, as explained by one woman here:

> *Addison*: "Nobody is going to run after a suspect for a mile and a half, but I do think that there is some worth to it because if you get into a scuffle, they usually last about two minutes. And you need endurance for that…I mean, I don't love [the physical test]. I think the fire department has a better idea; you know, doing things that are actually indicative of the work."

However, the women also said fitness testing can be used to gauge an officer's risk of injury. It was noted that an officer who struggles with flexibility in the sit and reach test may be more at risk of joint stiffness and other related injuries as they age, and though officers would never need to complete a minute of sit ups on the job, having a strong core was noted as important for future back health.

The Police Academy

In the interviews, participants related their experiences in the police academy, the first step in an officer's career. Seven official police academies are scattered throughout Illinois, overseen by the Illinois Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board (Illinois Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board, n.d.; see *50 ILCS 705*). However, not all interviewees began their careers in Illinois. During the interviews, many focused on the theme of fairness. They said the academy was a place where those who worked the hardest, were physically fit, intelligent, and disciplined were rewarded by superiors (i.e., through positive feedback or ranking highly in the class). The women showed appreciation for this perceived fairness as it allowed them to properly showcase their abilities:

> *Kate*: "I showed up, I worked hard, I was very serious, I was paying attention. I brought my best efforts to the physical part; I brought my best efforts to the classroom part. I graduated second in my class by a 10^{th} of a percentage point. You know, in the academy, hard work and effort was rewarded in a very fair manner."

> *Rachel*: "I had a great experience in the academy…I did the very best I can, you know, so, I didn't have any troubles or any issues in the academy. And I realize that I have kind of a different story than a lot of women; I'm pretty fortunate."

Some women still noted some challenges of the academy. For example, one woman explained that physical appearance requirements, such as hair style, were occasionally a problem for women recruits. Though acknowledging that these requirements were made for their safety, women officers were sometimes frustrated by having to wear their hair in specific styles (e.g., braided, tight bun) that can sometimes be tough to achieve with little time after academy workouts or showering. Another woman explained that what is taught in the academy does not necessarily represent actual policing; she said while the focus of the academy was on the law, firearms, tactics, and hard skills, she learned the most while on the job. Several interviewees said their experiences in the academy, while pleasant, were not indicative of their early experiences as police officers.

Experience as Police Officers

Despite being at the top of their classes in the academy and exhibiting strong physical abilities and communication skills, some of the women still encountered doubts by others of their policing skills, particularly regarding physical strength. These doubts were sometimes directly shared with the women and other times implied:

> *Emma*: "If it's an unexperienced, young male officer, when a woman shows up to back him up, he might think, 'Oh great, how is she going to physically help me in this situation?' And I think that they need to realize that [policing], it's not always—it should not always be a physical game…. so, I think that, you know, that kind of stuff might have occurred when I was younger."

> *Rachel*: "I was in the field training program and I was with a male training officer. We got called into the lieutenant's office to go over my work. And while we were sitting in the office, he had a look at my field training officer and said, 'Hey, all her numbers are pretty good, but have you gotten her into a fight yet, can she hold her own?'…So, I mean it's like, [I am] five foot, four inches, 125 pounds, you know. They thought oh, can she handle this job?...But I think what that did for me was to try twice as hard to be you know, accepted."

The theme of the women having to prove themselves early in their careers surfaced throughout many of the interviews. Many women said they had to work twice as hard in comparison to their male peers to be viewed as competent officers. Though frustrated by this perception, the women often channeled this energy into personal improvement and pursued opportunities to become more competitive officers, as noted by two women here:

> *Kate*: "I kept my head down. I kept my nose to the ground. My philosophy was go in there and work harder than anybody else is willing to work, each and every single day."

> *Addison*: "From day one, I knew I had to run circles around everybody else. And to this day, I am still running circles around everybody else…. like, every time you put me down, I'm just going to work harder…I'm just going to study harder, get more education, you know."

This group of women was highly resilient, shifting any doubts about themselves into personal empowerment. However, despite some of the women's repeated efforts to prove themselves as capable officers, some experience continued harassment and discrimination. Some of this harassment occurred openly and other times it was more covert:

> *Danielle*: "So, I'm sitting there, I'm talking about demographics, I'm teaching [the department] how to recruit because I want to get them fliers to hand to people they think would be good police officers out in the community and so forth. And then I had this White officer say we lowered the standards to hire Blacks and women."

> *Kate*: "People put naked pornographic magazines in my mailbox with notes that said is this what you look like with your clothes off? They put rubber replicas of male genitalia in my mailbox. And I was, you know, afraid to tell on anybody."

When the women were asked about their option to report the harassment, they said speaking up may have incurred worse consequences. First, they feared complaining about these experiences would show weakness and indicate to the other officers that their negative comments and harassment were working as intended (i.e., to bring the women down). Second, they noted that reporting the behavior could have led to direct retaliation, such as increased harassment and further social exclusion. Instead of attempting to navigate the internal reporting system and risking further loss of social equity, many used their reactions, or lack thereof, to these experiences to show the other officers they were tough enough for the job:

> *Rachel*: "There were patrol officers that were not progressive-minded. What I found with them is that there was a certain faction that didn't think women should be in law enforcement, but for me, that was a challenge. And so, what I did was just concentrated on being a good back-up officer and making sure that I carried my load…I'll be good at my job and win them over."

> *Kate*: "If I show them that I'm strong enough, if I don't complain, if I let this roll off my back, if I don't act like a baby, if I don't report them, they will see, you know. I felt like the best way to get them to stop focusing on the fact that I was a girl cop was to show them that I was a good cop."

Several women noted that speaking up became easier as they spent more time on the force. Many learned that directly confronting officers who made disparaging comments was a particularly effective strategy for quickly reducing negative behavior. However, the women noted that strategy could be challenging while having no seniority and trying to maintain one's already shaky social acceptance. Many said harassing behavior lessened as older male officers with more traditionalist views retired. Overall, this group of women said the comments made them work harder to achieve acceptance and respect within policing culture. This was described as easier than rejecting policing culture entirely at the time (e.g., filing complaints) which would have been met with intense social exclusion and harassment.

Pursuing Promotion

The women offered many reasons why they were interested in, and pursued, promotion. As noted, many responded to challenges and doubts about their policing skills by working harder. In this process of proving themselves as capable officers, some of the women became involved in investigative or administrative work so that when promotional opportunities arose, they were well-qualified:

> *Danielle*: "I learned how diverse the field of law enforcement is as far as different things that you can do. And then as I got better trained, I worked for people who were like, I don't even know how they got promoted. But I promise you, if they could get promoted, I

could get promoted. And pretty soon, I started wanting to have more and more responsibility."

However, some of the women quickly discovered that the promotional process was tainted with bias:

> *Kate*: "That was really the story of my career at my [first agency]…promotions, a lot of times, were very heavily weighted on the trust-based relationships that people built outside of the organization. And those greatly revolved around fishing trips, camping trips, and motorcycle trips that I was never invited to."

Several interviewees explained the importance of these private, social experiences, both for building relationships with other officers in the department and for receiving invaluable promotional advice, and they were frustrated by not being included in these opportunities.

Experience as Police Leaders

All of the women interviewed had achieved multiple promotions in their departments to become leaders, with most sequentially moving through the ranks (e.g., from patrol, to sergeant, lieutenant, deputy chief or commander, and chief). Some women skipped promotions (e.g., moving directly from sergeant to deputy chief) and others held special positions along the way, such as master patrolman, detective, or canine (K-9) handler. Some women indicated that resistance escalated once they began receiving these promotions:

> *Kate*: "When I started to really get time on the job and I went back to school and I advanced my education and I started to be a contender for promotion and advancement in the organization, that's when the backstabbing really began."

For example, the women noted that following their promotions, officers who had been friendly soon became hostile. While acknowledging that this resistance also occurred to men who had received coveted positions, the women endured speculation that their promotions were based on gender, rather than qualifications:

> *Danielle*: "There were several people that were not happy [that I was promoted]. They felt that, oh, she's just a woman…and that's how she got promoted…but I've had to work hard for everything I got."

> *Emma*: "I go to the store and run into a guy that works part-time [at the police department]…We're making small talk, and he tells me he's mad because he put in for sergeant at his full-time job and he didn't get it because some 29-year-old blonde chick got it over him because they needed to promote females. And he's like, 'Oh, well, I'm not talking about you,'…but obviously there's something with females that he's biased, because he felt he wasn't getting promoted based on her sex."

For some, there was also speculation they slept with a senior officer to receive a favorable position:

> *Kate*: "I think when you score higher than a person who has more tenure than you, it's hard for them to accept, you know? And they don't go 'Wow, she must have studied harder than me,' or 'Wow she must've tried harder than me.' They go, 'Well, she must be sleeping with the police commissioner.'"

These comments were particularly frustrating to the women as they undermined the hard work and effort it took to be promoted. Such comments were not made to men officers who had received promotions. Instead of acknowledging the education and training that went into becoming competitive, some fellow officers chose to paint gender as a beneficial aspect, as opposed to a negative, as implied when they were just patrol officers. Beyond these direct remarks, some of the women were simply not acknowledged as police leaders at all. One woman described an experience at a policing conference where, while wearing identification, she browsed police technology vendors:

> *Melanie*: "I would approach the vendor first, even though [my husband] and I were walking together. Two of them…I'd ask a question, and they would only respond to [my husband]. Their responses were directed toward [him]. And they were so blatant that I just said, 'You just lost our business,' and walked away."

This subtle disrespect—another example of which was calling the women in official capacities by their first names—was an experience shared by several interviewees.

However, despite the challenges they had experienced as leaders, the women still greatly valued their positions and felt empowered to guide their departments via a supportive and communicative style of leadership. This style was in opposition to the culture in which they rose through the ranks. The women described multiple techniques they used to support their officers:

> *Addison*: "I always tell people, if something happens to somebody, instead of ignoring it, why don't you bring in a casserole? Bring in a more nurturing perspective, because I hear from officers in other departments that they have a chief that you know, just started giving out birthday cards, and they want more of that."

> *Melanie*: "I try to find the strengths in every person that works here and capitalize on it, meaning making sure they know they're appreciated, and they are given cases to show their strengths."

Overall, the women described a humanistic approach to their leadership styles. They said their positions allowed them to enact change they wanted to see earlier in their careers. To the interviewees, any resistance put in their way after becoming leaders would not stop them from transforming their departments and affecting policy:

> *Rachel*: "You're going to upset some people as you try to effect change, but for me…every decision I make, I ask myself three questions. Am I doing the right thing for the right reasons at the right time? If I answer yes to all of those questions, then you can be mad all you want, I don't care, I'm still moving forward."

Being a leader provided interviewees the opportunity to affect their departments in practical, substantial ways. Many made significant efforts to connect with their officers, their communities, and those who are justice-involved:

> *Addison*: "I just want to be kind to people, you know, that are going through something harsh, yet do the job…you have to find that balance. And I've always had that. That makes me happy…to be able to do what I have wanted to do since I was 19 years old, is just talk to somebody in a human interaction, even though they're going to jail."

Some of the women indicated that the relationships between their officers felt like a family. Small gestures, such as celebrating each officer's birthday and remembering their spouse and children's names, were considered within the responsibility of being a good leader and were greatly valued by their departments.

The interviewees also emphasized the importance of normalizing women representation in high-rank positions.

> *Kate*: "I think part of the reason I encountered some of the challenges….wasn't because people didn't like women and it wasn't because they didn't like me. It's just because in their mind, they didn't have any type of model or example of a female in a strong leadership position or authoritative role and it wasn't making sense to them."

> *Rachel*: "When I first came onto the department, it never occurred to me that I was alone. Because when I started, there were no females in rank, and so because you don't know what you don't know…like I didn't think it was possible for a woman to move up in the organization. Then, because the chief promoted a female to sergeant, that kind of opened that possibility for me."

Representation in leadership was considered an important aspect of inspiring others to pursue promotion. However, as some of the women ascended through the ranks, they became frustrated their gender, not skillset, was made the focal point of their achievements.

> *Rachel*: "When I first started getting singled out as the first female lieutenant, it kind of made me mad. And then something switched in me, and I realized that this was an opportunity to be a mentor. To be that person that I didn't have, you know, when I came into the department…now a young woman coming into the police station sees this possibility."

Coping with Stress

When asked how they coped with the stressors of being police leaders, the women cited close friendships, familial relationships, hobbies, and other interests outside of law enforcement:

> *Addison*: "Being able to have a few people that I could talk to….that was really, really it…I get up every morning at 5 o' clock and I get on the treadmill or I lift weights, I go

> horseback riding, you know, I have a lot of things that I do to cope that are outside of work."
>
> *Danielle*: "I had a strict regimen of working out when I got off work, and just the very, you know, structured life…and not hanging out with police officers (laughs), believe it or not. You've got to have friends other than just police officers, because if you don't, then all you're going to do is talk gloom and doom."

All recognized the importance of self-care for police officers in general and had exerted specific effort into taking care of themselves through various physical and mental activities. Though it was considered important to have friends and interests outside of law enforcement, connections with other women police officers were also considered valuable. These connections allowed the women to share their experiences, bounce ideas off of one another, give advice, and provide varied perspectives to policing (e.g., working in small versus large departments). Some participants were married to other officers, which creates support and understanding around long hours and emergency calls.

Recruitment and Future Directions

The women said today's generation of officers is more accepting and familiar with women in leadership positions in comparison to when they entered law enforcement in the 1990s and 2000s. Many women said they had great relationships with their officers and were supported in their work.

> *Rachel*: "When I look at this next generation coming in, they don't even bat an eye, because most of their moms were in the workforce…when I came in, it was the tradition where mom stayed at home, and you know, that was that…but now, I think that it's such an evolution in this culture."

Recruiting women into the force is still a major challenge, they said. Due to current crises in police legitimacy, much of the younger generation does not want to be police officers. They said recruitment strategies must highlight the human side of policing and draw from recruitment strategies that work in other jurisdictions:

> *Kate*: "I believe it was the Colorado State Police, where they made a recruitment video, and it was all the women on the department…and it showed them on the job doing their work, and it also showed them off the job doing the things they loved. And it really humanized the job. And it showed women that, you know, you can still be yourself, you can still be a woman, you can still be a mom, you can still be an athlete. You can still be all the things you want to be and be a police officer."

In addition, the women suggested showing off the helping aspects of the job and the opportunity to be a positive influence in one's community, while fighting against the stereotype of policing as a profession of machismo and physicality:

> *Rachel*: "I talk to girls all the time, you know, in high schools….but it's difficult…. I'm sure it's because it seems like it's…a macho [job], you know. And so that's what I try to do, is go into high schools and say…it's a lot of fun if you're a good problem-solver, if you're a good communicator…. but I think sometimes they have this self-imposed idea you know, of what a police officer looks like. And they feel like they don't fit into that."

Ultimately, the women said in recruiting it is important to balance both the exciting aspects of being an officer (e.g., kicking in doors, working undercover) with the opportunities to help people and make a difference. To the public, law enforcement is primarily conceptualized as patrol, so the women indicated that highlighting the diversity of paths within the field—through accounting, information technology, investigations, and community policing—may attract a wider range of candidates. These women leaders spoke highly of their jobs and the opportunities they were afforded through their positions, such as receiving additional education, acting as mental health advocates and self-defense instructors, forming specialized units, and working directly with their communities on issues related to racial profiling and domestic violence.

Section 5: Recommendations

Policymakers and police agencies have begun to recognize the benefits that women can bring to law enforcement in light of conversations surrounding public safety and police reform (The Policing Project, 2021). This study examined the experiences of women police leaders by using their experiences to inform how police departments can recruit and support women officers and their abilities. Overall, the interviews unveiled several points for recommendation and discussion, including recruitment difficulties, promotional barriers, and other challenges experienced by women in policing.

Offer Mentorship for Women Officers

Many interviewees noted the importance of networking with other women officers to gain invaluable guidance and perspectives. While there are organizations and conferences that bring together women officers, such as the National Association of Women Law Enforcement Executives, some of the interviewees noted that some officers are unaware of these organizations and that funding may restrict the number of officers who can attend. Therefore, one recommendation is to strengthen statewide or local coalitions of women officers and create a supportive network for women officers.

Male mentors also can be important allies for women interested in the promotional process. The interviewees reported that support, encouragement, and training opportunities provided by male leaders earlier in their careers helped them feel confident enough to pursue promotion. Mentors should provide information and support without creating implications of gender bias or favoritism within their departments.

Prepare Women Officers for Promotion

Several women described experiencing escalating negative behavior from male colleagues as they became serious contenders for promotion. Despite pursuing education, training opportunities, and administrative work experience, the women encountered the perception that they were lesser officers. While general attitudes toward women police officers seem to be less discriminatory than in the past, more work must be done—particularly for women pursuing and attaining leadership positions (Silvestri & Tong, 2020).

With this in mind, women who are interested in promotion should prepare for the process. The women suggested those interested in promotion should pursue training and education to enhance their skillsets. They said operational, managerial, and interpersonal skills are necessary for their positions. Getting to know coworkers and valuing honest feedback also are suggested to women pursuing promotion. The interviewees said women must prepare for negative feedback and ensure their support systems are strong, especially in departments that are resistant to women police. The women said some may need to decide to apply outside of their jurisdictions, at police departments where their skills would be more valued, versus attempting an uphill battle in a toxic organization.

Employ Supportive Police Department Policies

Police departments must shoulder responsibility in creating a safe and equitable environment for women in law enforcement. Police leaders should ensure departmental policies regarding sexual and racial harassment are current and followed with consistency. The policies should include creative measures to protect those who report harassment from retaliation. Creating a culture that is intolerant of harassment and sexism is critical. Department leaders that want to attract a diverse group of officers for promotion must first ensure the departmental culture itself is inclusive and supportive.

Departments also must develop clear policies around the promotional process. Promotional decision-making should be transparent. Interviewees said the perception that women were promoted solely to support diversity initiatives created animosity within their departments. Therefore, departments should create objective criteria for selecting promotional candidates. The criteria should be developed by diverse group of officers and members of the community and publicly shared (National Center for Women & Policing, n.d.). These strategies will ensure that promotions are not bartered during social gatherings outside of the department, which was a frustrating occurrence for many of the women officers who were not invited to these outings. Police departments must also collect data on those pursuing and receiving promotions to determine where, when, and why those who are underrepresented may be falling behind or excluded in the process.

Use Recruitment Methods to Engage Underrepresented Populations in Policing

During the interviews, the women frequently noted their motivation to join and continue in policing was driven by a desire to help and connect with people. Recruitment strategies that highlight the service aspect of policing may be one method for attracting women. Some interviewees indicated their departments do not utilize targeted recruitment strategies. Considering the benefits that women bring to law enforcement, police departments should employ creative outreach strategies to recruit them, such as running social media campaigns, participating in career fairs, and taking advantage of other opportunities in the community as they arise.

Further, many younger people are extremely concerned with police brutality and the relationship between policing, racism, and state violence (Genforward at the University of Chicago, 2019; Howard League for Penal Reform, 2012). Police leaders looking to mend the relationship between their communities and officers should employ recruitment strategies that help them identify persons who are reflective of the community, both in terms of gender and race. However, leadership should be careful to not place unrealistic pressure on these individuals to transform the culture of policing entirely (Schuck & Rabe-Hemp, 2005; Strobl, 2020). Departments should be open to feedback on their roles in the community and develop partnerships that allow for honest communication between officers and the public. Departments showing accountability and openness to change may be more likely to attract youth to positions in law enforcement (Friese, 2019).

Section 6: Conclusion

Research shows that women in police leadership bring unique strengths to their positions, often using democratic and compassionate leadership styles to effect organizational change and connect with their communities (Savoie, 2015; Strobl, 2020). Lending support for this, the women interviewed for this study emphasized the importance of positive relationships both with their peers and with individuals involved with the justice system. They made significant efforts to connect with the communities they police and valued their relationships with citizens and city officials. However, they faced challenges to their entry into policing and pursuit of promotion. Harassment, discrimination, and challenges to authority can create a toxic culture that drives women away from careers in policing. Ensuring that women officers have access to strong support systems both within and outside of their departments and opportunities for training and professional development can ease the promotional process. However, this must be paired with an organizational culture that discourages discriminatory behavior. Continuing to diversify police leadership to reflect those in the community and utilizing methods to rebuild trust within communities affected by police-sanctioned violence may be the first step in mending the relationship between police and citizens. Women police leaders may be a critical part of these initiatives due to their distinct leadership and communication styles, as well as the value they put on community policing and open feedback.

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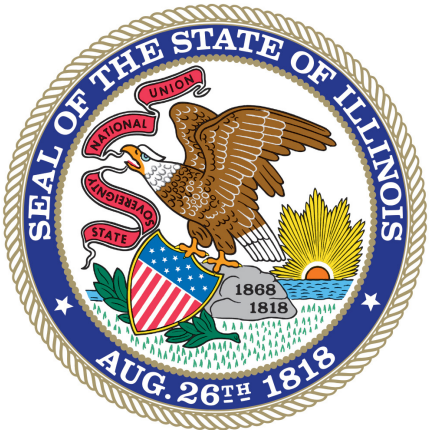

Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority
300 W. Adams Street, Suite 200
Chicago, Illinois 60606
Phone: (312) 793-8550
Fax: (312)793-8422
TDD: (312)793-4170

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