

RESEARCH ARTICLE

You still have to be one of the bros: Female college students' perceptions of law enforcement as a career

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Abstract

Despite initial growth in the 1970s and 80s, the percent of women in policing has remained roughly 12 percent over the past few decades. And while police agencies have struggled to recruit and retain officers across the board, the stalled growth of female officers remains particularly pronounced. Utilizing Acker's gendered institutions framework, the current study employs a qualitative approach examining female college students' perceptions of law enforcement in general and as a career during this particularly intense period of public scrutiny. Through 12 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, this research explores the current concerns, motivations, and considerations of females interested in a policing career. Results reveal common themes among potential female recruits including concerns about respect within a hypermasculine, male-dominated career, issues of fear and safety, family and childcare concerns, the sociopolitical climate, and tokenism. Implications and future directions are discussed.

Keywords

Police officers, criminology, policing, gender, recruitment

Introduction

The In 1908, Lola Baldwin became the first female police officer in the United States serving the Portland Police Department for 14 years (Archbold & Schulz, 2012). After Baldwin's appointment, other jurisdictions followed suit and by 1942 nearly every major city in the United States had policewomen on their force. However, at this time, female police officers were often relegated to the less dangerous aspects of policing by serving as jail matrons, juvenile officers, or secretary to a high-ranking officer (Rabe-Hemp & Beichner, 2011; Snow, 2010). It wasn't until the Civil Rights Act of 1972, which prohibited discrimination based on sex, when females were officially permitted to pursue careers as patrol officers (Martin, 1980). With the legal barriers removed, Catherine Milton, a prolific police scholar, proclaimed that "within a few decades 50 percent of all police officers will be women" (1978, p. 185). While the share of female officers grew steadily in the 1970s and 80s, doubling from 4.2% in 1972 to 8.8% in 1986, the latest numbers point to an unfortunate stagnation (Reaves, 2015). As of 2024, women make up only 12% of full-time state and local police officers in the United States (Gardner & Scott, 2022; National Policing Institute, 2024). While a few departments have upwards of 25% female officers, such as the Chicago Police Department; these forces represent an exception to the overall trend (Prenzler, 2020).

Despite the initial growth in the 70s and 80s, for the past two decades the percent of women in policing has remained around 12%, prompting concerns about the stalled participation of women in law enforcement. More recently, law enforcement agencies have been attempting to address the difficulties of not only recruiting female officers but also retaining them in the profession. As such, much of the prior research on female recruitment and retention focuses on the experiences of current female officers (Archbold *et al.*, 2010; Archbold & Schulz, 2008; Brown *et al.*, 2020; Padilla *et al.*, 2024; Rabe-Hemp, 2018). These studies include examinations of social barriers associated with recruitment such as unsupportive family, fears of discrimination and/or lack of respect, and integrating into a hyper-masculine culture as well as

the organizational barriers associated with retention such as maternity leave policies and promotional opportunities (Archbold & Schulz, 2008; Cordner & Cordner, 2011; Gossett & Williams, 1998; Seklecki & Paynich, 2007). However, there is less research that explores how women who are potentially interested in law enforcement perceive the difficulties associated with entering the profession. While the perspective of current female officers is undoubtedly valuable, by mainly focusing on women who have already 'made it', we are not able to examine the perspectives of women who are potential recruits (who may, or may not, ultimately pursue a career in policing). By focusing on some of these women, we can gain insight also into why women may choose not to pursue employment in law enforcement.

Utilizing Acker's (1992) gendered institutions framework, the current study employs a qualitative approach exploring female college students' perceptions of law enforcement in general and as a career. This research will contribute to the existing literature on barriers to female recruitment in law enforcement at a time of intense public scrutiny. As such, this study will also explore how the current socio-political climate and increased public criticism of policing as a legitimate institution influences the career choices of female college students. After the police killings of Michael Brown and then George Floyd, which sparked nationwide protests of police brutality, U.S. law enforcement is facing a "crisis of legitimacy" characterized by growing distrust among the general public, especially in communities of color (Todak, 2017: 250). While some recent research has examined the impact of the legitimacy crisis on perceptions, recruitment, and retention in policing, few have done so with a sample of female college students within the context of the legitimacy crisis (for exceptions see Diaz & Nuno, 2021; Morrow *et al.*, 2019; Todak, 2017).

Theoretical Framework: Policing as a Gendered Institution

Historically, policing has been (and continues to be) a male-dominated profession (Archbold & Schulz, 2012; Silverstri, 207; Rabe-Hemp, 2008) with males comprising roughly 87 percent of law enforcement officers in the United States (Gardner & Scott, 2022). Even though women have been included in policing agencies since the 1800s; their positions were restricted by prevailing gender norms resulting in tertiary roles such as jail matrons, social workers, secretaries, or only in cases involving children (Archbold & Schulz, 2012; Batton & Wright, 2019; Snow, 2010). While the percentage of policewomen increased in the 1970s-80s that number has stagnated to roughly 12 percent over the last two decades (Gardner & Scott, 2022). This is a troublesome figure as research demonstrates that policewomen are more likely to de-escalate violence (Rabe-Hemp, 2008), more likely to be trusted by community members (Salerno & Sanchez, 2020), and less likely to use force (Rabe-Hemp, 2008) than their male counterparts. As such, it is imperative that researchers continue to understand and identify the existing barriers keeping women from pursuing a career in law enforcement.

Acker (1992) offers a perspective from which to explore the underrepresentation of females in policing. Her theory of gendered institutions has proved to be a useful framework from which to examine the various institutional and social barriers experienced by women already employed in law enforcement (Shelley *et al.*, 2011; Silvestri, 2017; Todak *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, this study will extend the utility of Acker's theory of gendered institutions to explore how potential female recruits perceive these institutional and social barriers and whether those perceptions directly impact their career decisions.

The term "gendered institutions" refers to organizations in which "gender is present in the processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distributions of power in the various sectors of social life" including the structural and cultural norms of law enforcement (Acker 1992: 567). Therefore, since the institution of policing was developed by men and is currently dominated by men, in both entry level and leadership positions, the cultural norms and practices of law enforcement have been shaped almost exclusively from the male experience. Acker (1992) argues that these gendered processes and practices work to keep women out of male-dominated spaces making it difficult for women to enter, adapt, and advance in gendered institutions.

Gendered processes are the practices and procedures of an institution that control, segregate, exclude, and construct hierarchies based on gender (Acker, 1992; Silvestri, 2017). In policing, one way this is achieved is through the construction of images, symbols,

or ideologies that idolize and legitimize hegemonic masculinity (Acker, 1992; Todak *et al.*, 2021). Images of the 'ideal' police officer as male, domineering, physical, and masculine are perpetuated, although to a lesser extent now, through media representations and advertisements (Aiello, 2019; Rabe-Hemp & Beichner, 2011; Silvestri, 2017). This image of the 'ideal' police officer is pervasive and dictates public perceptions and beliefs about whom is best suited for such work (Heidensohn, 1992; Todak *et al.*, 2021). Another gendered process that occurs in male-dominated fields such as policing are the practices used to control and segregate women, such as sexual harassment and other discriminatory behaviors (Shelley *et al.*, 2011; Silvestri, 2017). These practices and behaviors are utilized to exclude, segregate, and communicate a message to women that "this is not their place" but rather a masculine institution best left to men (Shelley *et al.*, 2011: 354).

Adopting a gendered institutions perspective is critical to addressing the current underrepresentation of women in policing since it focuses on the extent to which the institutional structure itself, including its cultural norms and practices, have been formed by and through gender (Acker, 1992; Shelley *et al.*, 2011). The inclusion of women in policing is beneficial not just to the organization itself but to the community at large (Silvestri, 2017). It has been consistently documented that female officers have more trust from citizens, are less likely to use force (especially deadly force), are viewed more favorably by the community, and are better communicators (Ba *et al.*, 2021; Padilla *et al.*, 2024; Schuck, 2018; Todak, 2023). Particularly after the high-profile deaths of George Floyd, Tyre Nichols, Eric Garner, Breonna Taylor, Philando Castille, to name a few, the legitimacy and trust in police in many communities, particularly those of color has weakened significantly. Given that female police officers are viewed more favorably by communities, their inclusion into policing may help to repair some of the distrust between police and the communities they serve (Padilla *et al.*, 2024).

Literature Review

Barriers to Female Recruitment

While police departments express the desire to hire more women into the profession particularly with current initiatives such as the 30x30 program, which aims to have women comprise 30 percent of officer recruits by 2030, recruitment and retention of women in policing remains stagnant (Policing Project, 2021). When asked about the gender disproportionality in policing, police chiefs cited a lack of interest in the profession among women; however, this conflicts with female officer accounts (Cordner & Cordner, 2011). Policewomen suggest that the main reason for the underrepresentation of women in policing stems from poor recruitment practices by law enforcement agencies (Cordner & Cordner, 2011; Padilla *et al.*, 2024). While the importance of effective recruitment strategies cannot be overstated, there are other perceived obstacles that may deter women from pursuing a career in policing including hypermasculine culture of policing (Rossler *et al.*, 2020; Todak, 2023), family and childcare concerns such as maternity leave policies (Rabe-Hemp, 2008; Todak, 2017), and more recently the socio-political climate (Diaz & Nuno, 2021; Graziano, 2019).

Hypermasculine Culture

Policing is a gendered institution associated with several gender-relevant messages (Acker, 1992; Clinkinbeard *et al.*, 2020). For instance, recent research finds that media depictions of police work as violent and dangerous leads both citizens and officers to equate police work with hypermasculinity (Clinkinbeard *et al.*, 2020; Rossler *et al.*, 2020; Kosilicki, 2020). Moreover, the likening of police officers to 'warriors' or 'soldiers' further reifies policing as a masculine occupation associated with aggression, physical strength, and solidarity (Balko, 2014; Garcia, 2003; Silvestri, 2017). This cultural messaging perpetuates the notion that policing is best suited for men with the ideal officer embodying the traditional crime-fighter image (Silvestri, 2017).

While it is certain that policing is a dangerous profession, the frequency of dangerous, crime-fighting incidents often depends on the level of criminal activity in the community the officer serves. It is expected that in heavily populated high-crime cities, an officer will encounter more threatening incidents than an officer servicing a sparsely populated small town. And while the largest five percent of police departments employ a majority (roughly 62 percent) of officers still only 27 percent of all officers have ever fired their service weapon

while on the job (Morin *et al.*, 2017). However, many Americans tend to believe it is common for officers to fire their guns with 83 percent reporting they believe the typical officer has fired their service weapon at least once in their careers (Morin *et al.*, 2017). How Americans typically view the policing profession, and its actors, illustrates a disconnect between perception and reality and the ubiquity of the hypermasculine image of the 'crime-fighter' (Silvestri, 2017). Garcia (2003) further demonstrates the pervasiveness of this perception of policing as predominately engaged in crime-fighting in which police academy graduates report that 80 percent of their job is spent crime-fighting and 20 percent is involved in social work type roles. In reality, the balance of crime-fighting and social work type duties is flipped: 80 percent social work and 20 percent traditional crime fighting (Garcia, 2003). Although some departments have attempted to rebrand the image of policing to emphasize communication skills and community policing, in an effort to attract more female recruits, the cultural image of policing as an "all-boys club" primarily engaged in traditional crime fighting is deeply engrained in the American psyche (Rossler *et al.*, 2020; Todak, 2023).

Another disturbing facet of the hypermasculine policing culture is the rampant sexual harassment and sexual assault experienced by female officers from their fellow officers and superiors. In the first nationally representative survey of 2,867 female and male law enforcement officers from 1,135 departments across the United States, Taylor *et al.* (2022) found that 70 percent of female officers experienced non-physical sexual harassment and/or sexual assault from their colleagues. Non-physical sexual harassment included behaviors such as being shown pornography at work, asked to perform sexual favors, sexual innuendos, sexually suggestive jokes, and direct or indirect bribes for sexual activity. Sexual assault defined as "any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurred without explicit consent during their professional career as a police officer" included behavior such as fondling, forced sexual contact, and attempted rape. Similarly, Brown *et al.* (2019) found that not even seniority protected women from experiencing sexual harassment and sex discrimination. In a study of senior ranking policewomen, Brown *et al.* (2019) report that 15 percent of senior women officers experienced sexual propositioning and 56 percent were bullied by a senior officer. Sexual harassment and assault (SHA) of female officers in the workplace is an understudied area in police research, especially in the United States, as many officers fear retaliation; this may also explain why an anonymous study revealed 70 percent of female officers experience SHA while only 4-6 percent ever report it (Taylor *et al.*, 2022).

Family and Childcare Concerns

Unfortunately, female officers voluntarily depart from their agencies at higher rates than male officers with many citing a lack of family-friendly policies as a primary reason for their departure (Cordner & Cordner, 2011; Rabe-Hemp, 2009). More female officers (66 percent) than male officers (48 percent) report a lack of family-friendly policies as a reason for low representation of female officers (Cambareri & Kuhns, 2018). While more family-friendly practices would be beneficial for all officers, policies regarding maternity leave and childcare are of primary importance and most likely to impact female officers. Female officers, often the primary caregivers for their children, are more likely to face difficult occupational barriers from agency policies concerning pregnancy, maternity leave, childcare, rotating shift work, and relocation practices (Cambareri & Kuhns, 2018; Cordner & Cordner, 2011).

Family and childcare concerns are also a driving factor in women not seeking promotions within the organization (Alexander & Charman, 2023; Padilla *et al.*, 2024; Todak *et al.*, 2021). A recent study by Alexander and Charman (2023) reveals that while women are just as likely as men to pass promotional exams for supervisory positions, they are less likely to apply for those positions, thus reducing the percentage of women in leadership. Additionally, they found that although 95 percent of male police leaders reported having children, only 56 percent of female police leaders did indicate that female officers may feel that they must choose between having a family and their career (Alexander & Charman, 2023). Moreover, Silvestri (2017) argues that the time commitment required in policing disadvantages women with families as men have more access to the resource of time and are therefore more likely to work full-time without interruption. The inflexibility of the police time culture prevents women from seeking and obtaining promotions and can ultimately lead to low retention among female officers (Silvestri, 2006; 2017).

Socio-Political Climate

There is no doubt that the institution of policing is facing a “legitimacy crisis” stemming from the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO in 2014 exacerbated by the more recent killings of unarmed black citizens at the hands of police, including George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Tyre Nichols (Todak, 2017; Morrow *et al.*, 2019). These highly publicized and lethal police-citizen encounters have directed negative attention on police thereby impacting the public’s perception of policing as a legitimate institution. Dubbed the “Ferguson Effect,” some scholars have investigated whether the negative perception of police has led to de-policing (i.e., officers discouraged from doing their job) and thus increasing crime rates (MacDonald, 2015; Rosenfeld, 2015; Pyrooz *et al.*, 2016). While findings are mixed in this regard, other scholars have shifted their focus to how negative perceptions of police impact other outcomes such as recruitment and retention (Copeland *et al.*, 2022; Morrow *et al.*, 2019).

In their 2016 annual report, the Major Cities Chiefs Association (2017), which consists of chiefs and sheriffs in the 69 largest law enforcement agencies in the US, cited issues with filling vacant positions. The shrinking number of qualified police recruits is the product of a number of factors including demographic changes as well as the incompatibility of policing with the work values of Generation Z (Copeland *et al.*, 2022). However, in recent years, the issue of police brutality has perhaps impacted the recruitment and retention of officers to an even greater degree. It is argued that the “Ferguson Effect” has hurt police recruitment and retention efforts by challenging the legitimacy of the institution itself making the job of being a police officer even less desirable (Todak, 2017; Copeland *et al.*, 2022).

However, thus far only one study has examined the motivations or intentions of college students to become police officers within the context of the ‘legitimacy crisis.’ Morrow *et al.* (2019) surveyed 654 criminal justice students from two universities on their desire to become a police officer. The authors found that negative publicity and the perceived risks of the profession were factors discouraging students from becoming police officers. Although, it is important to note that the impact of gender was not explored thus, it remains unclear how the negative perception of police more broadly impacts potential female recruits and their motivations to join the profession. Considering the pervasive gendered messaging within policing, this study employs a gendered institutions framework to explore the underrepresentation of women in law enforcement.

Method

Recruitment

Potential participants were identified through our department enrollment records at a small liberal arts college in New England. Female-identifying students majoring or minoring in Criminology or Sociology were sent a recruitment flyer to participate in a one-on-one interview to discuss their perceptions of law enforcement in general and as a career. To secure a sample of females who were either currently or at one point interested in policing as a career, I included the following phrase on the flyer: “Have you ever considered a career in law enforcement? Want to share your thoughts?” Interested students were asked to contact me if they wanted to participate and I explained the scope and purpose of the study as well as the informed consent process. Participants were compensated with a \$15 gift card at the conclusion of the study.

Table 1. Demographic information.

Participant	Major	Age	Race/Ethnicity
P1	Criminology & Sociology	19	Hispanic-Black
P2	Criminology & Sociology	21	Hispanic-Black
P3	Criminology & Sociology	20	Black
P4	Criminology & Sociology	23	Black
P5	Criminology & Sociology	20	Hispanic
P6	Criminology & Sociology	21	Hispanic
P7	Criminology & Sociology	21	White
P8	Criminology	19	White
P9	Criminology	19	White
P10	Criminology	20	White
P11	Psychology & Criminology	23	White
P12	Sociology & Education	21	White

Sample

Fourteen female students contacted me to participate in the study however, two dropped out due to scheduling conflicts resulting in a sample of 12. Of the 12, seven were double majors in Criminology and Sociology, three were Criminology majors only, one was a Psychology major and Criminology minor, and lastly, a Sociology and Education double major. Participants ranged from ages 19-23. Six participants were White, 2 were Hispanic-Black, 2 were Black, and 2 were Hispanic. Demographic information is detailed in Table 1.

Interview Procedure

Interviews were conducted in person and in a private faculty office space during the 2021-2022 academic year. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and two hours, and were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Each interviewee was assigned a unique reference number to ensure confidentiality thus allowing participants to speak freely about their experiences and perceptions without identification. Basic demographic information (age, race, and sexual orientation) was gathered about each participant. Since this research is exploratory in nature, a semi-structured interview guide with mostly open-ended questions was utilized to provide some structure to the meetings, while retaining flexibility for the research to focus on the different information provided by the participants (Wincup, 2017). Topics explored during the interview process included interest in law enforcement as a career, overall perception of police, impact of highly publicized police brutality cases, barriers/concerns about policing as a career, knowledge of the application process, what could be done to make the policing profession more attractive to women, and motivations for pursuing a policing career.

Coding & Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts and identify themes from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Utilizing an inductive approach, I engaged in a two-step value-based coding process in which initial coding was employed to familiarize myself and identify the essence of the data followed by line-by-line coding resulting in a refined set of codes. Then, a concept map was created to organize and identify relationships between thematic codes. Through thorough reading and documentation of the transcripts, manual coding proved sufficient for identifying the major themes and sub-themes within the data. Moreover, given the relatively small sample size, the amount of data was manageable without the assistance of data analytic software. While (N=12) is a relatively small sample it is not uncommon in studies such as these with prior research recommending that qualitative studies obtain a sample size of at least 12 (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Fugard & Potts, 2015; Guest *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, saturation was reached by the tenth interview however, two more interviews were conducted to increase the robustness of the data.

Findings

Analysis revealed four primary themes and two subthemes. The four primary themes are: navigating a hypermasculine culture, 'second-shift' concerns, socio-political considerations, and (in)visibility. The two subthemes that emerged are fear & safety and impact of physical characteristics which are both organized within navigating a hypermasculine culture. Some of these themes have been discussed in prior literature, however less so within the context of potential female recruits. In addition, the emergence of socio-political concerns, physical attractiveness, and fear of sexual harassment are underexplored areas of research in general and within the female population.

Theme 1: Navigating a Hypermasculine Culture

Law enforcement is a male-dominated field characterized by hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal norms and values (Batton & Wright, 2019). Historically, policing has been conceptualized as "men's work" with a central focus on physical strength, aggressiveness, and dominance as inherent features of law enforcement (Rabe-Hemp, 2018). The implication being then that policing, both structurally and culturally, was built by and only with men in mind. As P6 (Hispanic) stated, "It's been built as a white male profession, and it's hard to get out of that." Likewise, P10 (White) indicated that with policing, "you expect to see a man...women are seen as the outliers."

Extant literature has described how women have traditionally used male-oriented techniques or adopted masculine behaviors or scripts as a strategy to excel in male-dominated workplace environments (Brown *et al.*, 2020). These techniques are essential to workplace survival in male-dominated occupations, in which women are expected to

assimilate into the subculture and prove that they fit in (Archbold & Schulz, 2008; Brown *et al.*, 2020). This notion of proving oneself by abiding by the rules within a hypermasculine culture was illustrated by participants when they were asked if they had any general concerns about being a female in law enforcement:

P4 (Black): Policing still comes off you know, like bro code. So as a female, it's like you still have to be one of the bros too, you know. Everyone has to agree with you being in it type of thing. There's like an extra component, even if your qualified you still have to prove yourself.

P11 (White): I don't know if I want to deal with like the being a female within a male-dominated group. It's like, do you want to spend every single day fighting for a place at your job?

Rabe-Hemp (2009) notes that debates about women's abilities as officers started only once women began to encroach on men's jobs and duties. Objections to women as officers were rooted in the presumed masculine nature of law enforcement. Policing was described as inherently a "man's job," and women were argued to be unsuited based on their physical abilities, emotional instability, and capacity to do the job. This sentiment was echoed by several participants who reported what they feared most about policing was not being respected or accepted by their male peers:

P1 (Hispanic-Black): The biggest fear I would have is like my fellow officers not respecting me. Um, because I feel like when you're, when you work in that kind of career, it's like you're a family. Okay, it's like if your other officer doesn't have your back, like what if something goes wrong and you know, like what if you end up like getting shot or something cause you guys don't know how to communicate or they don't like you because you're a woman or a minority or something like that. So, it's like, what if they have a problem with me because I'm not like them.

P3 (Black): The worst thing about the profession is the lack of respect from fellow officers, especially the older guys, they don't understand other perspectives, they're not open-minded.

P5 (Hispanic): My biggest concern being a woman in the field would be not getting as much respect from other officers and I think this would make it difficult for me to advance.

As illustrated in the quotes above, a central concern for females interested in police work is not being respected from their fellow male peers. This demonstrates that regardless of women's gains in the field of policing, there is a pervasive notion that it is still a "man's job" and women fear that they will not be accepted or respected as an officer.

Subtheme 1a: Fear & Safety in a Hypermasculine Culture

As noted, policing is perceived as requiring characteristics typically attributed to men (e.g., physical strength, stoic demeanor, dominance), whereas characteristics commonly defined as feminine (e.g. compassion, empathy, approachable) are perceived as weak, detrimental, and potentially life threatening in police work. According to this paradigm, policing is best left to males, who are more physically capable of strenuous activity and better able to assert themselves to take control over difficult and stressful crime situations. These ideas are communicated in the pervasive message of policing as an aggressive profession dominated by crime-fighting imagery (Brown *et al.*, 2020; Koslicki, 2020). Female respondents conveyed these thoughts when discussing their concerns about law enforcement as a career:

P3 (Black): One my biggest fears is that I'm gonna die or my partner's gonna die. I'm very nice and naïve and I think people could take advantage of that.

P5 (Hispanic): I think the violence aspect. Being put in scary situations as a woman, it's easy to get overpowered, and like am I going to be able to handle myself.

P7 (Hispanic): It's been seen as like a predominately male profession; it's ultimately geared towards men. As a woman, it's dangerous, like me I would

love to be a police officer but then hearing about how dangerous it can be, just is a lot.

Given the hypermasculine culture of police work, it is not surprising that women working in law enforcement often experience a hostile work environment and resistance from coworkers (Brown *et al.*, 2020). The masculine nature of police culture is well established and functions as a mechanism of solidarity helping to maintain group norms. For example, gender-related jokes and discriminatory comments are often used to remind females of their otherness and to isolate them as tokens (Archbold & Schulz, 2008; Davis *et al.*, 2023). Female officers are subjected to gender harassment, hostility, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion, all of which function to highlight and reinforce the masculine nature of the workplace (Davis *et al.*, 2023). As evidenced by their responses, when asked about any concerns they had working as a female in law enforcement, participants reported that they expect to be excluded, harassed, and discriminated against:

P1 (Hispanic-Black): And then also like, I have this fear that like, oh, like people are like, they're gonna discriminate against me because I'm a woman or cause I'm a person of color or like, just like worrying about sexism and sexual harassment and stuff like that cause it's kind of a boy's club.

P3 (Black): They might not, what you call it, be as inclusive. And I've already had that experience in the military ROTC program, which is why I dropped out of it.

P7 (White): Sexual harassment plays a part because it's such a male dominated field. It's also an issue not only you don't wanna get harassed but if you do and you report it, you're reporting to another man, and it probably won't be taken seriously. There's a fear of retaliation.

One participant explained that while she was concerned about working in a male-dominated field as a female, she was more concerned with her coworkers knowing her sexual orientation expressing anxiety about how they would perceive her:

P11 (White): Because you don't wanna deal with the ramifications within the workforce, whether it's being teased by your peers. Like usually when I start a new job, I wait like six months before even thinking of having that conversation, you gotta test the waters a little bit first cause you never know who you are working around.

As echoed by respondent, P11, in addition to their gender, sexual orientation presents another layer of 'otherness' that they fear may make them a target for harassment and/or exclusion within the workplace.

Subtheme 1b: The Impact of Physical Characteristics

Similar to fears of exclusion by their male peers, some respondents commented on how their physical attractiveness may negatively impact how their colleagues view them and their ability to do the job. In a conversation with a male peer, in which she told him of her desire to be a police officer, P2 (Hispanic-Black) recounts the following exchange:

And he's like, I really can't see you in policing. And it's like, not the first time I ever heard that. Like I feel like all the time when I tell someone, yeah, I wanna be a police officer, they're like, you wanna be a police officer? I can't even see you as a police officer, you're too pretty to be in policing.

Known as the "beauty is beastly" effect, men in male-dominated workplaces tend to view attractive women as less capable or less qualified, implying they were hired or promoted based on their physical attractiveness rather than their capabilities (Johnson *et al.*, 2010; Johnson *et al.*, 2014; Johnson *et al.*, 2018).

Others commented how the societal pressure on women to maintain a certain feminine physique has impacted their desire to pursue law enforcement:

P12 (White): I think that society has told us for so long that oh you're a woman? You need to have dainty arms, slim shoulders, that hourglass physique. And I think when it comes to women cops, who are physically fit with muscles, its deemed unattractive for some reason and there's a worry there... like, am I

going to find a partner? Are they going to be attracted to me because I don't fit that hourglass shape with dainty arms? I don't know.

The comments by P12 illustrates the delicate balance between the gendered expectations of society and that within the policing culture. Several scholars have noted that women often negotiate with themselves as to how to present themselves (Brown *et al.*, 2020; Rabe-Hemp, 2009). The conundrum of whether to present themselves as traditionally feminine which may be disadvantage in their workplace but has advantages in broader society (Brown *et al.*, 2020; Rabe-Hemp, 2009).

Theme 2: 'Second-Shift' Concerns

Patriarchy affects the structure and organization of police work simultaneously benefiting males and disadvantaging females. For instance, law enforcement involves shift work, and because officers shift preferences are based on seniority, work schedules can be unpredictable and subject to change frequently. This unpredictability differentially affects women, who are more likely to have domestic and child-rearing responsibilities than their male counterparts. Shift work may coincide with the timing of "second shift" responsibilities, which describes the unpaid labor performed at home after women return from their employment outside the home including childcare, cleaning, cooking, and other domestic responsibilities (Hochschild, 1989). These ideas are exemplified in responses from participants when asked about having a family as a police officer:

P6 (Hispanic): As a female, you're like the primary, you're the wife, the mom. You don't just get to go to work and come home. You have to think about everything, the kids, the schedules, the doctor appointments, and on and on.

P7 (White): Women actually have to take the time out of work to carry and have the baby, but we also look to women as the primary nurturers and caretakers. It's more time consuming for women to have children and work, especially police work.

The struggle to balance work and family life particularly impacts women who are early in their careers and working the least desirable shifts for which childcare is likely not available. In addition to affecting the retention rates of women already working in law enforcement, these issues likely negatively impact recruitment by reducing the number of women who even consider careers in policing as it is viewed as being incompatible with family life, as illustrated by the following comments:

P3 (Black): It takes up a lot of your time. You might have to do overtime shifts and then you might not really be there for your kid cause you've got to be there for the community. And a lot of police officers get divorced, so that kind of makes me nervous too.

P4 (Black): Because even me being a mom, I think about that, because police work isn't a job where you can be a full-time mommy and a full-time police officer, you know? That could push women out, you know, cause you don't want your kid to think, oh mommy loves her job more than me.

Taken together, these factors likely explain why female officers are more likely than their male counterparts to leave the profession as well as less likely to enter the profession in the first place (Charman & Bennett, 2020).

Theme 3: Socio-political Considerations

The socio-political climate surrounding policing has profoundly impacted society's views towards the legitimacy and value of police officers (Diaz & Nuno, 2021; Todak, 2017). Police use of force and the deaths of individuals such as Eric Garner and George Floyd, have diminished society's trust in police and has likely impacted department's ability to hire both male and female officers. Todak (2017) found that the likelihood of pursuing a law enforcement career was related to a person's perception of police. The only known study to examine the impact of the socio-political climate specifically on female college students, found that negative media portrayals and being employed under the Trump administration made women less likely to pursue a law enforcement career (Diaz & Nuno, 2021).

While most of those interviewed mentioned the socio-political climate as a concern in being a police officer, only three respondents indicated that it discouraged them from pursuing law enforcement as a career:

P1 (Hispanic-Black): With George Floyd and just all of the things in the media with people having to decide, like, cause I've heard many stories of like people of color in policing, having to decide like, are they with the police or are they with their race. I don't ever want to be in a position where I have to choose.

P6 (Hispanic): I used to be really interested in policing, but things have changed. I don't ever want to be put in a situation where I have to pick between what I believe in and my profession. So, after like the whole, Black Lives Matter movement, and seeing like police officers get yelled at in their face, especially black officers, being forced to choose if they stand with the profession or the community.

P11 (White): I think that (George Floyd) really nipped any interest I had in the bud. I was even considering the FBI but it's beyond iffy at this point.

Notably, however, most respondents reported that even with the current climate, they still wanted to pursue law enforcement and indicated that they wanted to participate in reforms from within the police organization:

P2 (Hispanic-Black): With everything that's been going on, like in the news and social media and things like that, um, it's definitely pushed me into wanting to be in the field and kind of change the perspective that people have of policing.

P3 (Black): But it hasn't deterred me from wanting to be an officer instead I think join them, join them so if you don't like what they are doing, be a part of the change.

P4 (Black): For me it's the social issues that have been going on, like racism. And like for me, I'm African American and female, so those are two characteristics that are hard to have in law enforcement. So that's like where I'm at...will things change by the time I get there, or will I have to be part of the progression.

Others indicated that they intended to pursue a career in policing, however, did not explicitly state that they wanted to be an active reformer:

P5 (Hispanic): I mean if I were to think that like all cops are bad and it's like I would stop wanting to be cop then they would keep good people from being good cops.

P10 (White): Um, it definitely impacted my perception a lot, but I didn't really like the whole idea of like defunding the police. Yes, there is a problem but like, we need police. I was more on the idea of like, let's reform how police are trained, how they deal with racial situations. In my mind I was like, yes, there's issues with the system, but there's issues with every system created.

Beyond, but certainly related to the current legitimacy crisis, several participants noted that the politicization of policing has made the profession undesirable:

P4 (Black): Law enforcement and politics has always gone hand in hand. Not because of police officers but because of politicians. They use law enforcement when it's beneficial for them and that's a turnoff for me.

P6 (Hispanic): It's so political. I did a community program, and I loved the officers, but then they took us on a tour to see the department and on their lockers were a ton of Trump stickers. And that shook me, cause for one I'm Hispanic, a DACA recipient, and a female and I just looked around like what am I doing here?

P10 (White): I think politics plays into law enforcement. It's caused people to like, support them blindly and then it caused people to hate them aggressively. It feels like there is no in between. Honestly, it's the most undesirable part of the profession to me.

As referenced in the above quotes, participants noted that while the unfortunate reality of the influence of politics on policing did concern them for some it did not deter them from pursuing a law enforcement career. However, as stated by P6, she was in fact deterred from pursuing policing due to the deep politicization of the career; this feeling was intensified by her identity as a Hispanic female and DACA recipient, compounding her existing feelings of exclusion in the policing culture.

Theme 4: (In)Visibility

The concept of tokenism further illuminates the experiences of women in policing. Kanter (1977) explains that groups whose numbers constitute a numerical minority in their organization are more visible, experience greater performance pressure, and are often marginalized. They are frequently in the "spotlight" where their work is highly scrutinized, and any error is assumed to be characteristic of all women on the job. Because tokens comprise only 15 percent or less of the overall group, their difference (in this case sex) becomes more obvious or visible to others. As a result of their increased visibility, tokens might feel that they have to work twice as hard as their peers to have to prove themselves to the group:

P2 (Hispanic-Black): But I feel like maybe because there's less women if you mess up, there's already like, well now she can't do this, or maybe we shouldn't have her go out and do this alone because this is gonna happen. Again, just having that kind of stigma, like, because there's less of us if you mess up it speaks to the larger group than if a man messes up. And being a woman of color of top of that...

Another aspect of visibility for tokens occurs when they are forced or pressured to take on duties or roles that make them stand out further from the rest of the members of their organization. Kanter (1977) noted that "on some occasions, tokens were deliberately thrust into the limelight and displayed as showpieces, paraded before the public" (p. 213). Several respondents called attention to this phenomenon in which they questioned whether diversity efforts are implemented to achieve real change or just public relations stunts:

P4 (Black): With recruitment, it's like do you really want me here to show you what I can do or do you want me here to show people, look we are trying (to recruit minorities), but are you really trying to change? Or is it all for show? So, to me it's like, are you hiring minorities just to show that you're trying to be more diverse even with the social issues going on or are you really trying to hire these people to get the diversity so that you can get an understanding of how to better interpret and handle these situations?

P6 (Hispanic): When you look at their Facebook page, it's all these good situations but it's like are y'all really changing anything? Like you're just showing what's good, but are you really trying to figure out what's wrong with you or are you just checking boxes? So, it's like, those private schools that will put that one black kid on the cover of the brochure, like look how inclusive and diverse we are...

P7 (White): They promote the woman during controversies because they're like, oh look we're so progressive look what we've done. And even if they don't market it like that, that's what it is. Like, with police brutality charges, they make the black woman the face of the department. But is anything really changing?

Participants also discussed the lack of female representation in law enforcement indicating that there is also an element of invisibility within this career:

P1 (Hispanic-Black): The times I've seen police officers, they've always been men. Like I haven't encountered an officer that's a woman.

P2 (Hispanic-Black): I feel like if it wasn't for me being at college, I wouldn't have known they (local police department) was even hiring. Like, I never saw police recruiters come to my high school, let alone female recruiters.

P7 (White): I think socialization plays a role. When you think about the history of police work, it wasn't a field that was made for women. We look at our history book, what are we gonna see inside it? Not female police officers.

When asked what they thought could be done to increase female representation in policing, some respondents indicated that female mentorship could help to attract and retain women in law enforcement:

P3 (Black): That kind of reminds me of like, you know, being the only black person in a school and then seeing like all your fellow classmates and teachers are white, but then seeing a black teacher. It's like oh, okay, I could do that.

P4 (Black): I think female mentorship in law enforcement is very important. It'll make me feel like okay, I can do this. Like, I seen that you went through it and you're still here, you're doing this.

P12 (White): If you are a female and you want to be a cop having another female officer who's done this job for a long time but like, hey, I'm your mentor, I got you, is huge. Like they went through the same things I went through and now look at where they are. And more than that, you just feel like you aren't alone.

The mention of female mentorship as a critical tool for recruiting more women into policing represents the enduring problem in the recruitment and retention of females in law enforcement: women don't apply because they don't see women represented but women are not represented because they don't apply.

Discussion

This study contributes to the existing literature on women in policing by focusing on the perceived challenges of those who are considering or actively pursuing the career. Utilizing a gendered institutions framework, which suggests that policing is an institution created and maintained by normative gender beliefs and stereotypes that in effect may control, segregate, and exclude women from law enforcement, this study employed a qualitative approach to uncover the underlying beliefs and concerns of potential female police recruits who expressed an interest in policing at one point in time. Themes revealed in this research provide support for findings from prior research regarding female underrepresentation in law enforcement, such as a hypermasculine culture and concerns about childcare, but also unveiled concerns not yet consistently explored with female participants, such as the impact of physical characteristics, issues of fear and safety within the workplace, and the politicization of the profession.

Four distinct themes (and two subthemes) emerged from the interview data: (1) navigating a hypermasculine culture, (1a) fear & safety (1b) the impact of physical characteristics, (2) 'second-shift' concerns, (3) socio-political concerns, and (4) (in)visibility. As prior research has noted, policing is a gendered institution which was built by and for men (Acker, 1992; Batton & Wright, 2019; Clinkinbeard *et al.*, 2020). Through advertisements, marketing campaigns, and fictional crime dramas, policing is often depicted as violent and dangerous leading both the public and officers themselves to equate police work with masculine, crime-fighting imagery (Rabe-Hemp, 2011; Rosslor *et al.*, 2020; Kosilicki, 2020). As Acker (1992), points out it is this type of imagery and cultural representations of policing are utilized to exclude women by overemphasizing the masculine aspects of policing in which women do not necessarily see themselves fitting into. It comes as little surprise then, that females in this study expressed concerns not only about battling the larger cultural messaging surrounding policing but also navigating the day-to-day norms dictated by a hypermasculine culture. As several participants in this study noted, policing is still very much perceived as an "all-boys club" and females interested in the profession must prove that they can fit into the culture (Rabe-Hemp, 2018; Sanders *et al.*, 2022; Todak, 2023).

As documented by previous research, females traditionally adopt masculine scripts or behaviors, whether superficially or otherwise, in order to excel in male-dominated environments (Brown *et al.*, 2020). Even though some departments have strived to present a diverse and inclusive environment, whether that be through new marketing materials or

diverse recruiting officers, the image of policing as an “all-boys club” is pervasive and continues to be a primary concern for females (Rabe-Hemp, 2018; Sanders *et al.*, 2022; Todak, 2023). While all participants in this study expressed this, most females (8/12) reported that even though gaining acceptance by their male counterparts was a primary concern, as of now it was not significant enough to deter them from pursuing the career. However, it is worth noting that one participant (P3, Black) reported that she dropped out of the military ROTC program due to feelings of not being accepted by her male peers and leaders. This can perhaps speak to the larger retention issues of females in law enforcement.

The two subthemes, fear & safety and impact of physical characteristics, emerged as a product of a hypermasculine culture and the prevailing norms dictated within. Concerns regarding fear and safety, both in the community and with their male counterparts. Several respondents reported a lack of confidence in handling dangerous situations. Due to the prevailing cultural message of police work as an overwhelmingly dangerous and physical job, it is not surprising that respondents discussed this as a real concern. However, while this concern was expressed, it was not significant enough to deter most of the respondents from a career on the force with some indicating that while they expected to encounter dangerous situations, they would rely on their training to successfully handle the situation. The subtheme of fear and safety extended beyond that of citizen encounters to male peers in the department. Ten of the twelve respondents indicated a real fear of the job was the likelihood of experiencing sexual harassment or discrimination by their male counterparts and leaders. Interestingly, participants expressed that they not only believed that harassment was a possibility in a male-dominated occupation but rather, they expected to be harassed or discriminated against. As Acker (1992) suggests, this type of behavior is used in male-dominated occupations as a way to again, control, segregate, and ‘other’ women. A recent study conducted by Magsi & Ariel (2024) of police officers in Birmingham, UK found that overall, sexual harassment affects 1 in every 5 law enforcement employees, including 8.3 percent of males and 43 percent of females. Similarly, Taylor *et al.*'s (2022) nationally representative survey of female officers in the U.S. indicated that roughly 70 percent had experienced sexual harassment by male colleagues and leaders.

The second subtheme to emerge within the context of a hypermasculine culture was the concern about their physical appearance and attractiveness. One respondent expressed concerns about how she might be perceived because she had often been told by peers that she was “too pretty to be in policing.” The notion that physical attractiveness is equated with capability on the job is representative of the prevailing masculine cultural norms where attractive female officers can be branded a “badge bunny,” “pansy police,” or “weak” (Rabe-Hemp, 2009: 125). However, female officers who present themselves as masculine, in an effort to be taken more seriously, can be labeled a “hard-ass” or “bitchy” (Rabe-Hemp, 2009: 123). Another participant noted that, given the perceived physicality of the job, she was fearful that being “too fit” or having “too many muscles” would make her unattractive making it difficult to find a romantic partner. This finding suggests that normative femininity, which Bartky (1990) defines as a set of disciplinary practices that control the female body including its size, shape, and movement, centers around sexuality. In other words, a female’s value is conditioned upon how men perceive and experience the female body (Rabe-Hemp, 2009). This preoccupation of how one’s body is perceived by men is argued to operate as a form of oppression that controls, regulates, and maintains the gender hierarchy (Bordo, 1989; Rabe-Hemp, 2009). While the findings are somewhat contradictory with regard to the status of femininity, both stem from the beliefs and values of a hypermasculine culture where women’s physical attributes are indicative of their worth and competency in the workplace.

In terms of second-shift concerns, since policing has historically and continues to be a male-dominated field, the structure and culture of a police department reflects the patriarchal and masculine norms of society. As an institution, policing was built by men, for men and thus its structure and culture continue to reflect that. Particularly surrounding childcare, females tend to be at a disadvantage as they are the primary caretakers of their children. Therefore, given the unpredictability that can come with police work coupled with a lack of suitable childcare providers, affect not only retention but also recruitment. As indicated by the participants in my study, as well as prior research, policing is perceived as incompatible with family life, which disproportionately affects women ultimately shrinking the pool of female applicants. Acker (1992) argued that gendered institutions are organized and operate around the assumption that the responsibility of family falls predominately on women. Given the gendered nature of policing, agencies may have limited and restrictive maternity and family

leave policies that do not fully support their female employees. Research finds that it is very common in male-dominated professions for men to parents while their female counterparts are not (Padilla *et al.*, 2024; Shelley *et al.*, 2011). One reason for this trend is that in many highly structured gendered institution like policing, the longest, most inflexible schedules tend to be during prime childbearing (and childrearing) years (Padilla *et al.*, 2024; Todak *et al.*, 2021). In order to adhere to these requirements and/or to compete with men for advancement, women may forgo or delay having children to avoid conflicts with family life (Silvestri, 2017; Todak *et al.*, 2021).

One underexplored area of inquiry is the impact the current social climate has on potential female recruits. Several studies have investigated the “Ferguson Effect” on recruitment and retention of police officers in general, but very few studies have been conducted on these issues after the tragic deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Tyre Nichols. The only known study to examine the impact of the socio-political climate of female college students, found that negative media portrayals and being employed under the Trump administration made women less likely to consider a career in law enforcement (Diaz & Nuno, 2021). However, while this study revealed that participants found the killings of citizens at the hands of police to negatively impact their perception of police, it did not necessarily discourage them from pursuing the profession. Only four respondents stated that the socio-political environment surrounding policing affected their motivation to pursue the career whereas the other eight respondents indicated that while the killings of George Floyd and others impacted their perception, they felt more motivated to join the profession. A few respondents stated that they wanted to be a part of the change and that they felt a responsibility to represent their communities from within the institution. Beyond, but certainly related to the current legitimacy crisis, several participants did express concern about the politicization of policing. Again, while this did not dissuade potential applicants, several reported that it was an undesirable aspect of the occupation. This particular concern has not yet been discussed in prior research on recruitment and retention in law enforcement. And while certainly little can be done about the relationship between politics and police, it does seem that in our increasingly polarized society, the political ideology and public endorsement of candidates by police unions may become a significant hinderance to the successful recruitment of diverse candidates.

Lastly, the theme of (in)visibility was prevalent in discussions with participants. What is striking about this theme is that females in this study reported feeling simultaneously invisible and hyper-visible. Kanter (1977) explains that groups whose numbers constitute a numerical minority in their organization are more visible, experience greater performance pressure, and are often marginalized. Given that females represent only 12 percent of law enforcement officers, they are frequently in the “spotlight” where their work is highly scrutinized, and any error is assumed to be characteristic of all women on the job (Archbold & Schulz, 2008). Moreover, potential female recruits are attuned to these issues, with several stating that they perceive the promotion of female officers as the face of a police department during times of crisis as publicity stunts rather than creating meaningful change. Their sentiment was not that women should not be promoted but rather, they should be promoted on their merit not for an inauthentic display of progressivism.

Juxtaposed to feelings of hyper-visibility, females also reported the seeming invisibility of women in law enforcement. Several participants reported that they had never interacted or observed a female police officer in the course of their work. While this did not discourage potential recruits from considering law enforcement as a career, it is something they were concerned about and perhaps could dissuade them at some point in their future pursuit. The issue of representation presents a cyclical problem: women don't apply because they don't see women represented but women are not represented because they don't apply. Potential solutions to these issues are discussed in the next section.

Implications

The major takeaway from this study is that by employing a ‘gendered institutions’ framework we see that similar to women already employed in law enforcement, potential female recruits are attuned to the challenges and barriers in police work. This suggests that while many of the issues women cite as reasons why they leave law enforcement, such as lack of family leave policies and the experiences of being a woman in a male-dominated field, are also the expressed concerns of females who have yet to enter the career. In other words,

it seems possible that women are not simply self-selecting out of policing in large quantities simply because they do not find policing itself an interesting career, but rather, the gendered structure and culture of policing, both of which is resistant change, is a primary concern for many, even among those who express a commitment to pursuing the career (Acker 1992; Shelley *et al.*, 2011; Silvestri, 2017).

Given this, a national campaign called the 30x30 initiative began as an effort to increase the representation of women in law enforcement in the United States and Canada. The goal is to increase female recruits to 30 percent by 2030 with evidence-based procedures and policies to attract and retain women in the law enforcement field. Some promising efforts include diversifying recruitment videos, flexible scheduling policies, job descriptions that will appeal to diverse candidates, and accommodating nursing mothers with pumping breaks and lactation rooms (Policing Project, 2021). Recently, the San Diego Police Department passed a bill to provide a childcare center specifically for law enforcement and first responder personnel. It is the first initiative of its kind and takes a concrete step towards breaking down barriers for women recruits and officers. Two other implications from this study include making female officers more visible in spaces with children and families. Recall that in this study, several respondents indicated that they had never observed or interacted with a female officer prior to college. Last, several respondents discussed the benefits of mentorship in a male-dominated field. While police departments may have an informal mentorship program, perhaps a more formalized approach could work to attract and retain female candidates and could be used to ameliorate some of the cultural concerns of new recruits.

Author Biography

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