

What Works: The **Social Science Research**
Behind Advancing Women in Policing

PROMOTIONS

30X30

April 2021

Barriers to Promotion

Representation in policing matters. Seeing officers who look like you can inspire more confidence that you will be treated fairly and understood, which is necessary for an agency to build legitimacy. Yet representation is about more than just hiring more women and other under-represented groups—agencies must also be representative in supervisory and executive ranks to fully realize the benefits of employing a diverse workforce.

Women officers, in particular, when promoted to positions of power, often positively influence policy and culture to result in better outcomes for community members, and public safety as a whole.¹

Yet despite these benefits, women are severely under-represented in policing leadership, and similar issues that prevent women officers from advancing their careers appear across agencies. We'll discuss the most common barriers here.



¹ Ba, Bocar, Dean Knox, Johnathan Mummolo, and Roman Rivera. "The Role of Officer Race and Gender in Police-Civilian Interactions in Chicago." *Science* 371, no. 6530 (February 12, 2021). <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/371/6530/696>; National Institute of Justice (NIJ). *Women in Policing: Breaking Barriers and Blazing a Path*. July 2019. <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/252963.pdf>; Shjarback, John A. and Natalie Todak. "The Prevalence of Female Representation in Supervisory and Management Positions in American Law Enforcement: An Examination of Organizational Correlates." *Women & Criminal Justice* 29, no. 3 (2019). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08974454.2018.1520674>; Bradbury and Kellough 2008

Shift change requirements. The variable shift changes that most agencies require—where newly promoted officers are given undesirable shifts, particularly the night shift—makes it difficult for women to balance family and work. Because women bear the brunt of childcare and other caregiving responsibilities, variations in shift assignment disproportionately affect their ability to participate in promotions.²

Harmful workplace culture. Research shows the culture of policing agencies and women’s interactions with male colleagues consistently send the message that women have to work harder than men to prove themselves to be good officers. This is especially true for Black women and other women of color, who are more likely to encounter extra scrutiny or prejudicial behaviors because of their race/ethnicity and gender.³ While more research is needed, studies and anecdotal evidence suggest that workplace culture also negatively impacts LGBT+ and gender non-conforming officers’ promotion aspirations.⁴ Research also suggests that there also is a perception among rank-and-file officers (particularly male officers) that women officers, if they apply, would be awarded a promotion simply because agencies are desperate to hire women in supervisory roles. If women officers feel as though they won’t be promoted on merit, they may not wish to be promoted at all.⁵

Barriers in promotional processes and unequal access to opportunities. A harmful workplace culture also can influence the very process of awarding promotions, as well as access to the opportunities that can strengthen a candidate’s qualifications. It’s important to think of harmful culture beyond the interpersonal level, such as verbal and physical harassment from colleagues that may discourage women from seeking promotion. To fully address barriers to promotion, agencies also must examine management decisions related to shift assignments and discipline, and the criteria used for annual evaluations and promotions, which can be left open to a supervisor’s subjective determination of what a “good” leader looks like rather than the skills needed for the job.⁶

² Schochet, Leila. “The Child Care Crisis Is Keeping Women Out of the Workforce.” Center for American Progress. (Mar. 28, 2019). <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/reports/2019/03/28/467488/child-care-crisis-keeping-women-workforce/>; Germano, Maggie. “Women Are Working More Than Ever, But They Still Take On Most Household Responsibilities.” *Forbes* (Mar. 27, 2019). <https://www.forbes.com/sites/maggiegermano/2019/03/27/women-are-working-more-than-ever-but-they-still-take-on-most-household-responsibilities/?sh=6c73517452e9>; National Partnership for Women and Families. *The Female Face of Family Caregiving*. Nov. 2018. <https://www.nationalpartnership.org/our-work/resources/economic-justice/female-face-family-caregiving.pdf>.

³ Todak, Natalie and Katharine Brown. “Policewomen of color: A state-of-the-art review.” *Policing: An International Journal* 42, no. 6 (2019). <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/PIJPSM-07-2019-0111/full/html>.

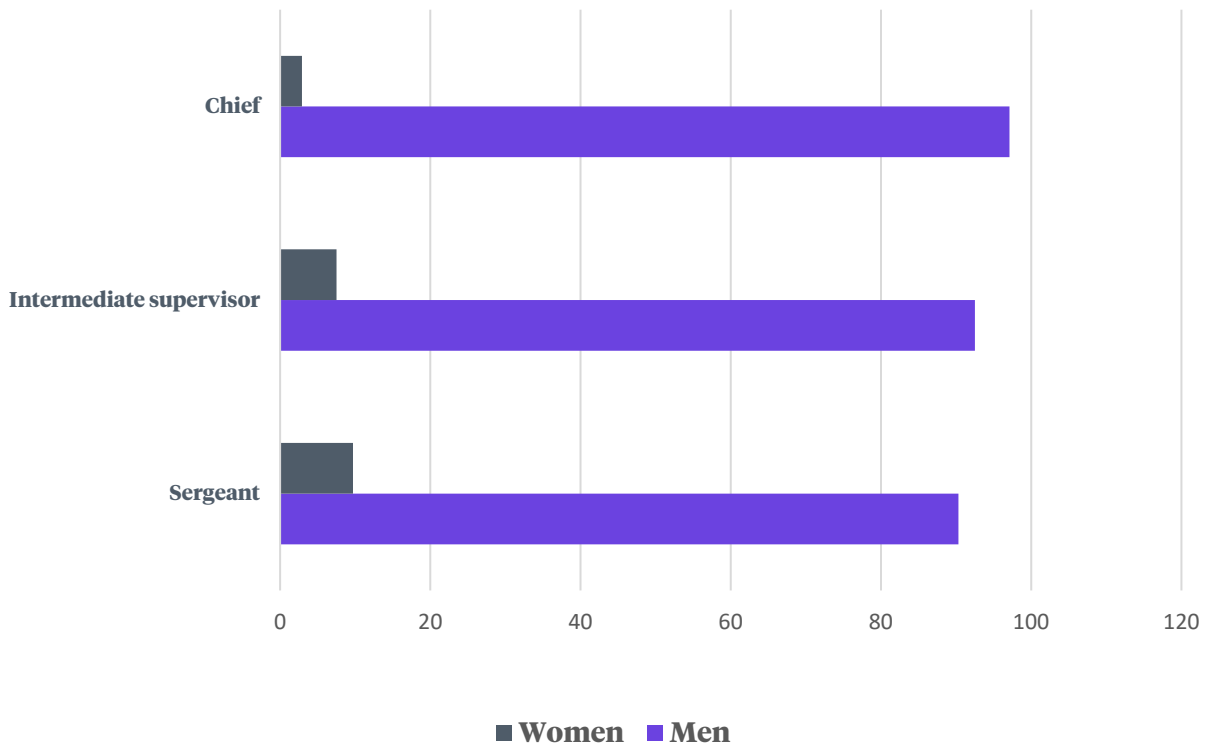
⁴ Lam, Kristin. “LGBT police officers say they’ve faced horrible discrimination, and now they’re suing.” *USA Today* (February 8, 2019). <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2019/02/08/lgbt-law-enforcement-officers-sue-over-workplace-discrimination/2404755002/>; Miller, Susan, Kay Forest, and Nancy Jurik. “Diversity in Blue: Lesbian and Gay Police Officers in a Masculine Occupation.” *Men and Masculinities* 5, no. 4 (2003).

⁵ Archbold, Carol A. and Kimberly D. Hassell. “Paying a marriage tax: An examination of the barriers to the promotion of female police officers.” *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management* 32, no. 1 (2009). <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/230814737>; Archbold, Carol A. and Dorothy Moses Schulz. “Making Rank: The Lingering Effects of Tokenism on Female Police Officers’ Promotion Aspirations.” *Police Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (March 1, 2008). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098611107309628>.

⁶ Gaub, Janne and Kristy Holtfreter. “Keeping the Women Out: A Gendered Organizational Approach to Understanding Early Career-Ending Police Misconduct.” *Crime & Delinquency* (2021); Lam 2019; Mark S. Brodin. “Discriminatory Job Knowledge Tests, Police Promotions, and What Title VII Can Learn from Tort Law.” *Boston College Law Review* 59 (2018); Jones, Matthew and Matthew Williams. “Twenty years on: lesbian, gay and

As a result, women and other officers falling outside the perceived “norm” based on their workplace culture may delay their participation in the promotion process, or refuse to participate at all. Additionally, women tend to be proportionally under-represented in specialized assignments, such as SWAT, which are seen as necessary for promotions.⁷ Though some women officers do opt out of these specialty units (often because of the same childcare issues and the fear of being perceived as “tokens” by other officers raised above), the supervisory discretion in appointing officers to elite squads has been identified as a reason for the under-representation of women in these roles.⁸ Finally, women may also be proportionally under-represented in training opportunities considered critical for promotion, such as the FBI National Academy, which creates another barrier to their advancement.

Percent of women officers in leadership positions (2016)



bisexual police officers' experiences of workplace discrimination in England and Wales." *Policing and Society* 25, no. 2 (2015); Rojek, Jeff and Scott Decker. "Examining Racial Disparity in the Police Discipline Process." *Police Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (2009); Miller et al. 2003; National Center for Women and Policing. *Recruiting & Retaining Women: A Self-Assessment Guide for Law Enforcement*. 2000. <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/bja/185235.pdf>; Martin, S.E. *Women on the move? A report on the status of women in policing*. Washington, DC: Police Foundation. (1989).

⁷ Todak, Natalie, Renee Mitchell, and Rachel Tolber. "'Well boys, welcome to the new law enforcement': Reactions to women on elite specialty units." Under review with *Women & Criminal Justice* (on file with author).

⁸ Todak, Mitchell and Tolber; Robinson, Susan. "Promotional and non-stereotypical policing roles: Are women opting out?" *Salus Journal* 1, no. 3 (2013); Kurtz, Don L., Travis Linnemann and L. Susan Williams. "Reinventing the matron: The continued importance of gendered images and division of labor in modern policing." *Women & Criminal Justice* 22, no. 3 (2012); Dodge, Mary, Jace Valcore, and David Klinger. "Maintaining Separate Spheres in Policing: Women on SWAT Teams." *Women & Criminal Justice* 20, no. 3 (July 2010).

Paths forward

Make promotional processes more transparent and less subjective. A promotion process that is more transparent and less subjective could help to encourage women to apply for promotion.⁹ As with all opportunities in the agency, policies should require that promotional opportunities and required qualifications are made available to everyone in the agency. Agencies should validate their promotional processes to ensure they actually measure the skills necessary for the position, and where possible, ensure metrics are as objective as possible.

Ensure equitable access to specialty assignments and professional development. Agencies should regularly collect data on who seeks and receives specialty assignments, leadership training, and other professional development opportunities, such as mentorship and shadowing. If women are not seeking opportunities considered requisites for promotion, the agency should host focus groups to understand why, and seek to mitigate those factors. If women are seeking those opportunities but are not receiving them, examine the selection process for latent bias.

Explore the culture around promotions. Supervisors should be aware of issues of “tokenism” and other discriminatory or disparaging views of women. This may affect how women officers see themselves and whether they pursue promotion. To address this, support for all promotional candidates should be framed in terms of acknowledging the qualifications that led to their promotion. Again, ensure requisite qualifications for promotional opportunities are communicated throughout the agency.

Examine your promotional processes and access to opportunities. Because many women officers are primed to see themselves as unlikely candidates for promotion due to a discriminatory workplace culture, shifting to a system where all officers are automatically included in the process could counter this issue (i.e., require individuals to “opt out” of consideration rather than “opt in”).¹⁰ However, this specific procedural change is not enough on its own to change a harmful workplace culture—it must be paired with broader efforts to diagnose and address patterns of discrimination and harassment in the promotion process throughout the agency.

Provide childcare support and as much flexibility as possible in shift assignments for all officers. Because childcare scheduling issues are the most cited as an obstacle for women who want to pursue promotion, agencies could provide on-site, affordable daycare for officers working the night shifts in their newly promoted role or help subsidize the cost of childcare for all officers with children.¹¹

⁹ U.S. Department of Justice and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. *Advancing Diversity in Law Enforcement*. (October 2016). <https://www.eeoc.gov/advancing-diversity-law-enforcement>.

¹⁰ Todak, Natalie, Lindsay Leban, and Benjamin Hixon. “Are Women Opting Out? A Mixed Methods Study of Women Patrol Officers’ Promotional Aspirations.” *Feminist Criminology* (forthcoming). On file with author

¹¹ Archbold and Hassell 2009.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS FROM THE **30x30 PLEDGE**

Essential

- Conduct surveys and focus groups to understand officers' needs in adjusting to new shift assignments and other work-life balance concerns, possibly in partnership with a local academic institution.
- Ensure individuals sitting on promotional panels receive bias training (or analogous training) at least annually.
- Track completion rates for sexual harassment, discrimination, and other related training, and take action necessary to achieve 100% completion rates. If you do not have such a training, implement it.

Strongly recommended

- Review the demographics of individuals serving on promotional panels. They ideally should be at least as proportionately demographically diverse as the department overall, if not more so. Adjust if necessary.
- Articulate the knowledge, skills, abilities, and experiences required for supervisory positions. Compare these with the content of your promotional assessments. Are your assessments measuring and prioritizing these items? If not, revise accordingly. More broadly, if your assessments have not yet undergone content validation or an analogous process, do so.
- Review your promotion processes and identify areas that require subjective rather than objective assessment. Seek to minimize subjectivity.

Recommended

- Conduct focus groups with a representative sample of officers to learn their concerns, priorities, and perceptions of culture, parity, and access to opportunity within the agency. Consider including civilian employees in your sample as well to understand their perspective and how it may differ from sworn officers.
- Review your department's programs and strategies to support professional development. Do you have a formal mentorship and/or shadowing program to support officers who intend to seek promotions? If not, implement such a program.
- If you do not already do so, start tracking demographic information about officers who seek and/or receive specialty assignments. It is also important to track demographic information about officers who seek and/or receive leadership training. If women don't seek these opportunities proportional to their representation in the agency, try to understand why, such as through focus group discussions or an anonymous survey. If women officers are granted these opportunities that facilitate promotion proportionally less than men, explore your selection criteria for latent bias.