

Women Chief Special Agents: The First Generation

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Portions of a June 14, 2005 presentation at the WIFLE conference, Rancho Mirage, CA, June 13-17, 2005.

INTRODUCTION

The modern history of women special agents in federal law enforcement agencies began in 1971, when President Richard M. Nixon issued Executive Order 11478. Section 1 of the order, Equal Employment Opportunity in the Federal Government, (1) prohibited discrimination in employment at the federal level because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, handicap, or age, and effectively ended the ban on employing women in the title of special agent. Stating that this “policy of equal opportunity applies to and must be an integral part of every aspect of personnel practice in the employment, development, advancement, and treatment of civilian employees of the federal government,” it for the first time opened up to women all jobs that required carrying a firearm, including positions in GS-1811 status, or criminal investigative positions, from which they had previously been barred. Agencies that hired women that year included the Secret Service and the Postal Inspection Service. Others, including the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), did not implement the change until 1972.

Women had a difficult time establishing credibility among their male peers and were forced to file numerous lawsuits against many federal law enforcement agencies. But it did not take long for them to succeed. Within a year of their appointments, five female U.S. Secret Service guarded presidential candidate Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm (D, NY), the first woman to campaign for a major party presidential designation. By 1993, when fewer than 200 of the Secret Service’s 2,000 special agents were women, a small number of them guarded not only presidential relatives, but the President himself.

The FBI hired its modern female agents in 1972, after the death of J. Edgar Hoover, when acting director L. Patrick Gray III ordered that women be accepted as

agents. The first women began training at the FBI Academy in Quantico that summer. One of the first women, Sheila Horan, who was a graduate student in education and psychology when she decided to change careers, became one of the highest ranking women in the agency. But indicative of how difficult it is to measure progress on the basis of individual women, in 1994 another of the first women retired and sued the agency.

Although the numbers of women in the FBI have increased, they comprise a small percentage of agents. As of June 30, 2003, women were 18.1 percent of agents and 66.9 percent of the support and clerical personnel. Within these percentages, non-white women were 3 percent of agents and 23.3 percent of support/clerical staff. Assignments of all women to what the FBI defined as executive staff were skewed in the direction of traditional roles; they were 9.5 percent of assistant and executive assistant directors but 61.5 percent of the administrative and public information executives assigned to the director's office.

The FBI is fairly representative of the current workforce; the percentages of women in federal policing have not been increasing rapidly. Since 1996 until 2000, women accounted for slightly over 14 percent of federal sworn officers. In 1998, the highest percentage of women in any federal law enforcement agency was in the Internal Revenue Service (just over 25 percent); virtually identical to the figures in 2000, when the IRS had the same percentage of women which was still, percentage-wise, the most female of all the federal agencies. No other agency had percentages higher than the teens; of the larger agencies only the DEA had fewer than 10 percent women. By 2002, women were still less than 15 percent of all federal officers with arrest and firearms authorization, and the IRS continued to employ the largest percentage (28 percent) and DEA continued to employ one of the smallest percentages (8.6 percent).

Amid the women in visible presidential cabinet positions, including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and two women on the U.S. Supreme Court, women hold about one fourth of executive level (GS-15) and above positions. Between 1994 and 2003, the number of women at these levels increased almost 75 percent from about 9,000 women to more than 16,000. It is obvious that as the 21st unfolds, there have been cracks in the brass ceiling, but that it has not been an easy road to the top.

Few Women at the Top

This study is about women who held the rank of Chief Special Agent or higher at the dawn of the 21st century. It is part of a larger study on women in law enforcement management. The information on the women police and sheriffs appears in *Breaking the Brass Ceiling: Women Police Chiefs and Their Paths to the Top* (2). Women police chiefs, sheriffs, and chief special agents completed questionnaires that contained both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions, which required checking either yes/no or selecting from choices that were provided, asked the women about their assignments, significant jobs before entering law enforcement, and about age, race, education, and marital status. The open-ended questions left spaces for answers directly onto the questionnaire. They included: what motivated you to take your first law enforcement position; if not your first agency, what motivated you to change, and questions about who aided in career development and how.

Useable responses were received from 158 women, including ninety-six chiefs of police (61 percent), eighteen sheriffs (62 percent), and forty-one federal women (31 percent). Forty-eight (49 percent) of the chiefs led municipal police departments, and forty (42 percent) led college and university departments that employed full-time, sworn police officers. Of the eight others, two were county chiefs, two were airport authority chiefs, two were tribal chiefs, and two were state police chiefs. The two state police chiefs (2 percent) were only two women to have ever led state police agencies; one has since retired. Seventeen of the eighteen sheriffs were county sheriffs (including one who was also the county coroner) and one was a city sheriff.

The federal women came from many agencies, including: Department of Agriculture's Office of the Inspector General (OIG); Air Force Office of Special Investigations; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF); Border Patrol; Customs; Department of Education OIG; Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA); Environmental Protection Agency's Criminal Investigations Division; Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); Health & Human Services, OIG; Immigration & Naturalization Service (INS); Marshals Service; U.S. Park Police; Small Business Administration, OIG; State Department, Diplomatic Security; Treasury, OIG/Tax Administration, and the Postal Inspection Service. Many of the federal women had recently been promoted but

two women indicated they were retired. It is likely that other women had already retired. Since many of those in “in-charge” positions had most likely entered federal law enforcement in the first wave of hires, many would already have been eligible to retire.

This, then, is who they are and how they came to be the first generation of women Chief Special Agents.

THE PRESENT

Age

The women ranged in age from 34 to 60. The age most frequently listed was fifty (seven women, or 17.1 percent). The mean and median averages were exceedingly close; between ages 48 and 49.

The youngest SAC had a bachelor’s degree, had earned her “in charge” position after 18 years in the only law enforcement agency in which she had worked, and had been in her position for about 4.5 years. Divorced when she entered her agency, she was married at the time of survey and attributed considerable support and assistance to her spouse. She managed a staff of about 100 people, 80 of whom were sworn personnel, in an agency of about 4,500 people.

Table 1: Age

Age (in 5-year increments)	Number	Percent
30-34 (minimum age was 34)	1	2.4
35-39	0	0
40-45	8	19.5
45-49	14	34.2
50-54	14	34.2
55-59	3	7.3
60-64 (maximum age was 60)	1	2.4
Total	41	100

Education

Thirty-nine women provided information on their education. Not surprisingly, considering the entry standards for federal law enforcement, all but one had at least a four-year college degree. In addition, ten (24 percent) had master’s degrees and five (slightly over 12 percent) held either a Ph.D. or a J.D. The woman with only a high school diploma was in one of the smaller federal agencies; she reported fewer than 250

people in the entire agency, and she supervised a small staff of fewer than 10 people; about ½ were sworn personnel. She reported strong support from her peers and her bosses.

Table 2: Education Levels

Highest Level of Education	Number	Percent
High school	1	2.4
Bachelor's	23	56.1
Master's	10	24.4
PhD/JD	5	12.2
Missing	2	4.9
Total	41	100.0

Despite the higher entry standards for federal service, the educational attainment of federal women is not very different from the women police chiefs and sheriffs, but that is because the women in those positions are better educated than their male counterparts, less likely to be true for the women SACs. Of the women chiefs, three (4 percent) held doctorates or law degrees, thirty-five (42 percent) held master's degrees, and thirty-seven (44 percent) had bachelor's degrees. The women with only high school diplomas were clustered in the smallest departments with fewer than fifteen officers. The women sheriffs were also similar to the SACs. They presented a startlingly different image from the "good ole boy" sheriffs often portrayed in film. Of the fifteen women sheriffs who provided information on their educations, 66 percent had at least a bachelor's degree and one had a J.D.

Race

All the women provided information on race. Thirty-five (85.4 percent) identified themselves as white, three (7.3 percent) as black, two (just under 5 percent) as Hispanic-surnamed, and one as other. These percentages have changed only slightly in the intervening years. In 2004, ATF's Julie Torres was promoted in Miami, becoming one of the few female or male Hispanic-surnamed SACs and, more recently, the FBI promoted two black women to SACs, My Harrison in Memphis, Tenn., and Debra K. Mack in

Mobile, Ala. The racial makeup of the federal women is similar to the police chiefs and sheriffs, who were also overwhelmingly white.

Table 3: Race

Race	Number	Percent
White	36	85.4
Black	3	7.3
Hispanic surnamed	2	4.9
Other	1	2.4
Total	41	100

Military Service

Like the women chiefs and sheriffs, few of the federal women had a military background. The four who did were split, one in the Army MP Corp, one in the Navy, one in the Marine Corp, and one in the Army reserve.

Marital Status

All the women reported on their marital status prior to embarking on a career in law enforcement. Thirty-one (almost 76 percent) were single, one was co-habiting (women were not asked whether they were living with a man or a woman), six (slightly under 15 percent) were married, and three (slightly more than 7 percent) were divorced.

Thirty-nine women provided information on their marital status at the time they completed the questionnaire. Ten (almost 25 percent) were single; four (almost 10 percent) were co-habiting; twenty (almost half) were married; four (almost 10 percent) were divorced), and one was a widow.

Considering the indications that law enforcement careers—particularly those in the federal service, which require considerable amounts of travel and frequent transfers—may impact on couples remaining together, the figures are difficult to interpret. There is no way of knowing whether “married” at both times meant “married to the same person.”

The need to consider these factors was indicated by one sheriff who specified she was married at both times but not to the same man, and another who wrote she was married to the same man at both times but had been divorced from him and that they later remarried. Interestingly, possibly because the election process makes their lives more public, the sheriffs provided the most personal details. The federal women were the least forthcoming with personal data.

The increase in co-habiting may reflect the age of the women or the more open attitudes about this arrangement regardless of whether the partner is male or female.

The women in federal service were similar to chiefs and sheriffs in that the largest categories of marital status were single and married, although the categories had reversed. The percentage of single women dropped by two-thirds and the percentage of married women more than tripled. It is also not surprising that more women were single at the start of their careers, since they were obviously younger at that time.

Table 4: Marital Status Prior to Law Enforcement Career

Social status	Number	Percent
Single	31	75.6
Married	6	14.6
Divorced	3	7.3
Cohabiting	1	2.4
Total	41	100

Table 5: Current Marital Status

Social status	Number	Percent
Single	10	24.4
Married	20	48.8
Divorced	4	9.8
Cohabiting	4	9.8
Widowed	1	2.4
Did not reply	2	4.9
Total	41	100

Again like the chiefs and sheriffs, many of the federal women had a partner who was in law enforcement. Of the twenty-eight who provided information, the answers were evenly divided; thirteen (almost 32 percent) said yes, and fifteen (almost 37 percent) said no. Of the thirteen whose partners were in law enforcement nine said their partner worked in the same agency.

Two careers in the same agency seem to shorten the careers of women. While a number of the women chiefs I interviewed were married to men in their agencies, the men were older and had retired. Some of the chiefs married men in their first departments and were able to move for a chief's position elsewhere, also because their

husbands were already retired and had no professional or personal problems with becoming the “trailing spouse,” a role more often associated with women.

On the other side of the coin, a finding in Canada that almost half of women Royal Canadian Mounted Police were married to men in higher ranks observed that large numbers of women left when their husbands were transferred to small commands in which there was no position available for the wife. Enlightened transfer policies can help keep families and careers together, but in small agencies or in agencies like the Mounties, where many of the commands are very small, this is not always possible.

Table 6: Partner in Policing

Partner in Policing	Number	Percent
Yes	13	31.7
No	15	36.6
Total responded	28	68.3

Table 7: Partner in Same Agency

Partner in Agency	Number	Percent
Yes	9	64
No	4	36
Total responded	13	100 of those responding

Years in Law Enforcement

The women had a wide number of years of experience in law enforcement, ranging from a “rookie” with eleven years experience, to a veteran with thirty-two years. The mean was about twenty years, which included time spent in other agencies.

Table 8: Years in Law Enforcement

Number of years (in 5-year increments)	Number	Percent
10-14 (min. years 11)	2	7.5
15-19	10	25.0
20-24	14	35.0
25-29	10	25.0
30-34 (max. years 32)	3	7.5
Total	41	100

Although there remains a perception that federal agencies recruit from local law enforcement, this was not the paths of most of the respondents. More than half the

women (twenty-two, or 53.7 percent) had begun their law enforcement careers in their present agencies. Of the nineteen who had started elsewhere, the largest plurality, seven (just over 17 percent) came from another federal agency, while only four came from a municipal police department. Other than the pattern of transfers within the federal government, no one type of prior law enforcement experience seemed more valuable than the others; one woman came from state policing, three from county policing, two did not specify, and two indicated that they had worked for more than one law enforcement agency before their current career.

Although the women were not asked from which federal agency they had transferred, it would be interesting to know whether some agencies were “career starters,” places from which women moved to larger or more prestigious agencies or whether the opposite is true. Smaller agencies might provide greater opportunities for upward mobility (large fish in small pond) or might provide a culture that requires less travel or that is more family-friendly in other ways.

The small pond theory may hold similarities with successes of women police chiefs, who until the selection of women in four major cities in late 2003 and early 2004, had been clustered in small departments. The four big-city women are Ella Bully-Cummings in Detroit, Kathleen O’Toole in Boston, Heather Fong in San Francisco, and Nannette Hegerty in Milwaukee (who was the U.S. Marshal for the Eastern District of Wisconsin from 1994 to 2002).

Of the women who came to federal service from other law enforcement agencies, many seem to have been looking for a better career, rather than running away from negative environments. Eight of those (53.3 percent) who came from outside federal service had reached the rank of lieutenant or above in their prior employment. Thus, although fewer came from other police agencies than had been expected, there may be some validity to claims by police chiefs—especially small department chiefs—that federal agencies cherry-pick their most upwardly mobile female officers, a complaint that is also made in relationship to minority male officers.

Table 9: Single Agency Women

	Yes	No
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Number	22	19
Percent	53.7	46.3
Total	41	100.0

Table 10: Previous Agency Type

Type of Agency	Number	Percentage
Other federal	7	17.1
Municipal policing	4	9.8
County policing	3	7.3
State policing	1	2.4
Other policing	2	4.9
Multiple agencies	2	4.9

Years in Charge—New To Management

This cumulative years of experience the women’s careers represented contrasted sharply with the number of years they had been in their present positions. Of the forty-one respondents, fifteen (almost 37 percent) had been in their present positions for one year or less. Another eighteen (more than 43 percent) had been in their positions for between one and five years, and the smallest number, ten (fewer than 20 percent) had been in their positions more than five years, with only two serving ten or more years (one for ten years and one for twenty-two years).

Table 11: Tenure in Current Position

Number of Years	Number	Percent
Up to 1 year	15	36.6
1-5 years	18	43.9
6-10 years	7	17.1
More than 10 years	1	2.4
Total	41	100

Reinforcing that it took many years to reach management, almost half (eighteen women, or close to 44 percent) indicated their present position was their first “in-charge” position. The phrase “in-charge” was used because not all federal agencies use the same

titles to designate rank or position within the agency. Slightly more than thirteen years was the mean average the women had worked before reaching an in-charge position.

These women are the first generation of women managers in federal law enforcement, but few were the first women in their current or former agencies. Reflecting the retirement patterns of law enforcement and the entry of women into policing on an equal basis with men in the early 1970s, most of the women who would have been the actual first in their departments have likely retired.

Only one of the nineteen women with experience in a department other than her current one was the first sworn woman officer in her department. Representing the time it takes to reach a supervisory position, though, seven of the twelve who answered indicated that they were the first women supervisors in their agencies

Finding a Work/Personal Life Balance

There is much talk about the difficulties professional women have in maintaining a life balance, particularly because they continue to bear the major responsibility for home care, child care, and elder care. Even though many women who have reached supervisory or management levels may have little time for anything beyond work and home, they were asked about outside activities that were either quality-of-life enhancing or career-enhancing, specifically whether they attended law enforcement meetings, or were involved with women's groups, charities, community or religious groups.

It is difficult to draw conclusions because not everyone answered for all categories. Maybe the fact that so few women answered at all says more about their difficulties in maintaining a work/life balance than the questions! Attempts to learn whether the groups were helpful also proved elusive, since it became apparent that "helpful" can mean many things, and although the question asked whether the groups were professionally helpful, comments reinforced that some of the activities were helpful in maintaining a work/life balance rather than in the mentoring sense. Despite the responses being open to interpretation, they provide a glimpse into how the women divide their often-meager personal time. A striking fact is that participation in law enforcement-related activities took up the largest segment of the women's time. Also, although only sixteen women indicated they were involved in women's groups, fully half of them saw this as career-enhancing. Since the women were not asked to list or specify

the groups, there may be some overlap. Groups such as WIFLE, the International Association of Women Police (IAWP), or the National Center for Women & Policing may fit either—or both—categories.

Table 11: Balancing Career and Personal Interests

Activity	# Attending	% Responding	% who find it career-enhancing
Law enforcement meetings	33	80 %	45.5 %
Community groups	17	41.5 %	29.4 %
Women's groups	16	39 %	50 %
Religious meetings	12	29.3 %	12.2 %
Charity meetings	11	26.8 %	2.2 %

The activities in which women participate on their time leads to questions about motivation to enter law enforcement—still a non-traditional field for women—and the motivation to move up in rank. The reasons varied widely: Career ladder—a chance move up; challenge—mental or physical; curiosity; early retirement options; fun; independence; needed a job; parent (or sibling or close friend) suggested it; patriotism; salary; student internship, and/or wanted out of a clerical position. The motivation for accepting the position as a special agent in charge, also varied, including: A way out of headquarters; ambition; challenge; ego; more money; pride—I was better than the others; the next step in the career path; to be a leader; to change the culture; to make an impact, and/or why not me?

THE FUTURE

There has been an increase in the number of women in top-level positions. Although a few of the women did not come from the ranks of career special agents, in the cases of those who did, each was a 20+-year law enforcement veteran and each had made multiple moves nationally or internationally before being named to her present position.

One of the biggest surprises came in 2003, when the DEA, despite its small number of women, became the first federal law enforcement agency with a woman CEO. Karen P. Tandy was a federal drug prosecutor who was an associate deputy attorney general and director of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force. Her deputy administrator, Michele M. Leonhart, had been in charge of DEA's Los Angeles field

office. She is the first woman in the agency to come from the agents' rank to a top position. Barbara Riggs, who was the tenth woman agent at the Secret Service, the first woman field office supervisor, and the first woman to supervise a presidential protective division, in 2004, after 30 years of service, became the Service's first woman deputy director, a position she continues to hold. She had been planning to go to law school in 1975 when a Cornell University classmate suggested she join the Secret Service. She didn't know women were eligible.

In January 2004, the IRS named Nancy J. Jardini chief of Criminal Investigation, which is the agency's law enforcement division. She became the first woman to lead the organization, directing a staff of about 4,500 employees, including almost 3,000 special agents, more than a quarter of whom are women—the largest percentage of women special agents in any federal law enforcement entity. Like Tandy, she did not come from the agents' ranks, but had moved to IRS from the Justice Department in 2000 and had previously worked as a federal prosecutor and a defense lawyer.

Two women came to federal service from other areas of policing—one successfully, the other less so. Theresa Chambers, named chief of the U.S. Park Police in 2002, was dismissed after she told reporters that she had been forced to cut back on patrols because officers were required to guard national monuments in the wake of post-Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist concerns. After achieving many firsts in municipal policing, she seemed unprepared for the confidentiality about police matters that is maintained at the federal level. Connie Patrick in mid-2002 was named director of the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center. After serving as a sheriff's deputy in Brevard County, she spent 20 years with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE), a statewide investigative agency that functions much like a federal agency.

Women in federal law enforcement have made their greatest progress in the Offices of Inspectors General. Created by Congress in 1978 primarily to root out waste, fraud, and abuse, some continue to play more of an auditing and investigatory role than an arrest-oriented one, which may account for women's greater acceptance. As of mid-2002, women agents comprised almost 30 percent of the IGs' staffs in the Departments of Agriculture, Education, Health and Human Services, Interior, Small Business Administration, and Treasury (Tax Administration). But national concerns about

immigration and terrorism may decrease the growth in IG areas in favor of agencies that have expanded offices outside U.S. borders, requiring an even higher degree of mobility than in the past. This could disadvantage women, because research into work-related issues has reinforced that positions that require training away from home, are not conducive to career breaks, and require frequent transfer are not attracting women. This means that incumbent women will have to take the lead in encouraging women to enter federal service by acting as recruiters who stress the positives—rather than the negatives—of law enforcement careers, and by encouraging their agencies to adopt family-friendly policies that have a larger effect on women's lives than on men's, but which are also people, rather than solely women's, issues. Just as private industry has learned to live with the dual career family, so must the U. S. government. While these are not easy tasks to add your schedules, they cast you as mentors for those who hope to follow in your footsteps and break their own brass ceilings.

NOTES

1 This is the Executive Order that expanded the role of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). The order and references to various amendments can be found at <http://www.eeoc.gov/federal/eo11478.htm>

2 For details on the study's methodology and for data on the chiefs and sheriffs, see Dorothy M. Schulz, *Breaking the Brass Ceiling: Women Police Chiefs and their Paths to the Top* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004).

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