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Description automatically generated**Women Rise to Top of Police Ranks in Several Major U.S. Cities**

"Don't undervalue what women bring to policing. I wouldn't call it the feminization of policing, but a little gender balancing and critical mass could certainly change the way we do policing in this country."

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By Karen Testa, The Associated Press,

BOSTON (AP) -- The new police chiefs at four of the nation's biggest cities -- Boston, San Francisco, Milwaukee and Detroit -- share some similar credentials.

All boast more than two decades of police experience. All have worked their way up the ranks. And all are women.

Some say it's just coincidence that four women within six months have been named to the highest ranking police position in four major cities, a natural evolution two decades after consent decrees and affirmative action cases forced departments to hire more women.

But others say a shifting paradigm in policing -- from an emphasis on a paramilitary structure to one more reliant on communication and community relations -- has contributed to the increasing success of women in the field.

"When I first came on the police department, we were trained in a more paramilitary-type environment," said Kathleen O'Toole, 50, who was named Boston police commissioner in February. "We were trained as soldiers to go out and fight the war on crime, and it was the police versus the community.

"We came to realize in the mid- to late 80s that that model of policing was failing miserably," she said.

O'Toole joins Detroit Chief Ella Bully-Cummings, Milwaukee Chief Nan Hegerty and San Francisco Chief Heather Fong in a unique sorority. Fairfax County, Va., a community of about 1 million outside Washington, also has a woman -- Suzanne Devlin -- as its acting chief.

For most of these women, being named to the top-cop job was not the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. In fact, as girls they did not see these jobs as even a possibility because women simply didn't hold those positions.

"Not in my wildest dreams did I think I'd be in this position," O'Toole said.

Women still make up an average of only 13 percent of police officers, according to the National Center for Women and Policing, a division of the Feminist Majority Foundation in Arlington, Va. Of the 18,000 police departments across the nation, approximately 200 have women chiefs -- yet only four of those are in 62 cities defined as "major" by the federal government.

"We're not talking a lot of progress here, just to put it in some perspective. But we are talking high visibility, and all eyes will be on them," said Margaret Moore, director of the national center who retired as the highest ranking woman in the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.

Los Angeles police Chief William Bratton, a former Boston police chief and longtime mentor of O'Toole, said the rising profile of the women is a natural evolution of policing. He said one of the reasons for the success of these four is that they have not tried to be known as one of the boys.

"I think every one of these women is seen as a woman," Bratton said. "They're proud of being a woman. They've not had to go out drinking and carousing with the guys. They've made it on their own."

That's not to say the establishment is now completely accepting of women on the force.

"Unfortunately there's still an element of macho there," said Bratton, whose department is 22 percent women -- far above the national average. "Keep in mind, we're only into the second generation of women. We're still early in the evolution of that process."

Hegerty, the Milwaukee chief, said the men on the force do not respect women who try to be one of the guys.

"They understand that women officers are essential, but they really want you to be women," she said. "On the other hand, they don't want you to be afraid to mix it up when the situation calls for it."

Jim Kouri, vice president of the National Association of Chiefs of Police, said he was not surprised to see women reaching the top in increasing numbers, since they've been working their way up for several decades. He also noted that academy training is different now than it was 30 years ago.

"I hate to use the word softer, but it's less paramilitary," he said.

His organization does not keep figures broken down by agencies run by women. He said the group does plan to change its surveys to include questions about female officers; for example: how many per department, their ranks, how long it has taken them to reach that level.

Moore, of the women and policing center, said research indicates the support for community policing is stronger among women, who've traditionally shown better communication skills. Still, the paramilitary structure -- which works well for critical incidents -- continues to "hang on by their nails," she said, despite the arrival of high-profile female chiefs.

"Don't undervalue what women bring to policing," she said. "I wouldn't call it the feminization of policing, but a little gender balancing and critical mass could certainly change the way we do policing in this country."

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For additional information:   
National Center for Women and Policing [www.WomenAndPolicing.org](http://www.womenandpolicing.org)   
(Archived, Police1 by Lexipol, https://www.police1.com/archive/articles/women-rise-to-top-of-police-ranks-in-several-major-us-cities-5F71YQnqjqHjiyuR/)