

PINK AND BLUE: BARRIERS WOMEN FACE ENTERING POLICING

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ABSTRACT

Women face many barriers when they chose to pursue a career in the criminal justice system, including policing. One of the most formidable is the physical fitness test. The physical fitness requirements negatively impact female recruits, as women are more likely to fail out of police academies than males. Should they graduate from the police academy and enter the policing profession, they are met with additional obstacles. The main problem women face today, much like their predecessors, is struggling to be accepted into the police subculture. Additionally, female police officers routinely are disrespected, harassed, and discriminated against (Rabe-Hemp 2008, 2009). These negative experiences can start as early as in the police academy and can continue throughout her career. Because of the many challenges they face in the policing professions, one may assume that women are more stressed and experience more burnout than their male peers. Surprisingly, previous research notes female and male officers do not have as many stress or workplace problem differences as expected (Hassell, Archbold, Stichman, 2011; McCarty, Jihong, & Garland 2007). Given the barriers that women face when entering policing and the many challenges they encounter throughout their career, policing culture largely remains resistant to women joining its ranks.

BARRIERS WOMEN FACE POLICING

Women have only been able to be police officers for a relatively short time. Stebbin Wells is credited as the first sworn female police officer in the United States when she assumed her position in 1910. However, even with this first milestone, women were restricted in their duties. They were often assigned to guard juveniles and incarcerated women or protect girls at social events. They were seen as maternal caregivers and not true police officers. It was not until much later in United States' history, in 1972, the first woman was assigned to patrol. Women were relegated to roles that were not defined as "real" police work, and this practice continues today, as they are assigned to assist victims of crimes or juveniles in the criminal justice system (Mallicoat 2019). With each small step women take to integrate themselves into policing, there has been one large barrier keeping them out, the physical fitness test.

The requirements of the police physical fitness test have led to fewer women in policing. There have even been claims that the physical test was expressly created to keep women from entering the field, even though employment requirements for women were already higher. For instance, female police officers were required to have a college or nursing degree, while male police officers did not even need to have a high school diploma (Mallicoat 2019). This sort of discrimination can be seen in 1991, when SEPTA (The Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority) hired an exercise physiologist who created a physical test with a timed 1.5-mile requirement for police officers that resulted in only a 6.7% pass rate for females and 55.6% pass rate for males. Ultimately, a gender discrimination lawsuit against SEPTA ensued and further testing to prove that the timed 1.5 mile run correlated to successful job performance was required (Bisset, Bisset, & Snell 2012).

Statistics from the Department of Justice (DOJ, 2016) show how the requirements of physical test negatively impact female recruits. Researchers found that 1 in 7 recruits who enter basic training are female. From 2005 through the period of 2011-2013, there was a slight 2% decline in the number of female recruits, from 17% to 15%. Additionally, of the 2011-13 recruits entering all academies, only 38,560 out of 44, 891 (86%) completed basic training. Approximately 9 out of 10 male recruits completed basic training

as compared to 8 out of 10 female recruits. Importantly, only 88% of the academies used physical fitness tests to evaluate recruits, which raises the question of are physical fitness tests necessary if some agencies can measure the successfulness of recruits without it?

Should women surmount the obstacle of the physical fitness test, their struggles in the policing profession only continue. Women have a hard time gaining acceptance into the male-dominated police subculture. As described in the literature, they often need to determine their master status: Are they a POLICEwoman or a policeWOMAN (Rabe-Hemp 2009)? Do they sacrifice their femininity to fit into the police subculture, or do they prioritize their identity as a woman and conform to the stereotypical feminine policing roles and duties assigned to them? Additional barriers exist for women in policing, including gender-specific workplace stress and burnout, lower salaries and lack of promotional opportunities.

Reforms to the criminal justice system could possibly lead to changes in policing, which as a result could alter how physical fitness tests are implemented. A macro-level factor driving reform is a shift in ideology. The criminal justice system, including its policing practices, became more punitive during the late 20th century and is now shifting toward community policing. Community policing focuses more on problem solving and police-community relations, which has been associated with feminine gendered traits, while the “tough on crime” policing philosophy was more male gendered with aggressiveness and emotional detachment being in the forefront. As a result of the change in policing style, there could be a corresponding change in the testing with a greater focus on communicating with the public rather than the physical aspect of policing.

THE PHYSICAL REQUIREMENTS

The physical requirements to become a police officer affect female recruits differently. Women are more likely to fail out of police academies than males. As stated before of those who go to basic training, 87% percent of male recruits complete basic training as compared to only 80% of female recruits. According to the 2016 DOJ report, the top five reasons for failure in the police academy for males include: 1. voluntary withdrawal (36.2%); 2. academic (24.1%); 3. physical standards (12%); 4. injury/illness (9.4%); and 5. disciplinary (5.8%). Meanwhile the top five reasons for failure of basic training for females were: 1. voluntary withdrawal (30.5%); 2. academic (17.2%); 3. physical standards (16.7%); 4. firearms performance (12.1%); and 5. injury/illness (10.1%). Additionally, women had higher involuntary failure rates in basic training than men for physical standards, firearms performance, withdrawn by sponsoring agency (the agency that sent them to basic training), and driving performance. From this it can be seen that female police recruits were more likely to fail out of basic training than men in tactical fields, while men were more likely to fail for other reasons such as academics and disciplinary reasons.

Complicating matters, there is a lack of uniformity in physical fitness standards among policing academies. In Schulze (2012), 96 academies and their physical fitness standards were examined to identify variations in core requirements. Of the 96 academies, 31% had gendered standards, meaning that different testing requirements exist for males and females. Sixty-eight percent of academies used standards that were not gendered, meaning that the requirements were the same for males and females. Nine of the 96 agencies only required a doctor's note to prove physical fitness. The core requirements that all 96 academies had in common were the 1.5-mile run, push-ups, and sit-ups; however, the thresholds to pass the requirement varied significantly. For the run, the minimum required threshold to pass ranged from 11:13 to 21 minutes. For sit-ups, the minimum required range was between 14-50, and for push-ups, the minimum required range was between 4-52.

The fundamental problem with the major inconsistency in physical test requirements is that some states have more lenient requirements than others, resulting in a scenario in which a recruit may not be able to become a police officer in one state or county but may be able to in another. Schulze (2012) also found that some women's minimum requirements in certain academies exceeded standards of other academies, including those with non-gendered standards. She noted that “the lowest number of required push-ups for one academy was 4 [for women or men], but the least amount required from academies using gendered testing was 20 push-ups for women” (2012 p. 96). Consequently, a woman in one academy can be held to much higher standards than a male recruit in another.

The overall performance averages, or the most common measurement for each core requirement, include: 25% of academies had a sit-up minimum of 21-26, 32% of academies had a push-up minimum of 15-20, and 28% of academies had a 1.5-mile minimum time of 15:00-15:55 minutes (Schulze 2012). While these are the averages found, there is no scientific basis for these tests and their correlation with a an effective police officer, either the exercise itself or the minimum threshold applied. Academies claim that these tests are developed by experts, but often they do not relate to the current physical requirements of policing as the work mainly sedentary or requires minimal physical exertion, as will be discussed more fully below. Also, the variation in minimum requirements between academies exacerbates the issue, unless it can be proven that each academy has different minimum requirements due to specific features in the jurisdiction (e.g., crime, greater use of foot patrol, etc.) that would require more physically fit police officers. Additionally, cutoffs or pass rates need to be proven to correlate with job performance. An explanation is needed as to why the cutoff for a push up rate is 23 instead of 22 as it begs the question: What effect does that one push-up have on job performance?

A solution that is considered but ultimately rejected by Schulze (2012) is the creation of separate requirements at all academies for males and females. However, one issue with this proposal is that it could magnify the difference in physical fitness requirements between males and females and could increase workplace hostility. If male police officers believe that their female counterparts did not need to possess the same physical requirements, and therefore had an easier path to becoming a police officer, they may not trust female police officers in a critical situation because they may believe that the training females received is insufficient to protect them.

Bisset, Bisset, and Snell (2012) also examine the physical agility tests and fitness standards and find that the requirements do not correspond with the commonly performed responsibilities of a police officer. Policing is a relatively inactive job with occasional moments of rigorous activity or use of force that requires skills learned in basic training. Much of the time, on-duty tasks are performed sitting, walking, or standing. Bisset et al (2012) surveyed 250 current police officers from eight departments regarding the importance of specific physical acts and found that the most important were: being able to walk a mile in 18 minutes, sprint 300 meters in 57 seconds, bench press one's own weight, complete an obstacle course, and perform 21 push-ups in 1 minute or less. In contrast, the physical abilities that were deemed the least important were: running a 1.5 mile in 12 minutes, sitting and reaching 16.5 inches, and being able to vertical jump 19.5 inches. The researchers also look at what was deemed as the most frequent specific physical ability used in policing. A common trend was that the frequencies of all physical abilities were ranked as either being occasionally or rarely used. The only tasks that were rated as frequent, and even then, it was only among 22% of the respondents, were lifting and carrying, pushing, and dragging and pulling. One difference in responses based on gender was that female officers were more likely than males to report dragging and pulling as common (26% vs. 9%), as well as sustained foot pursuit (12% vs. 2%). Possible explanations for these findings could be the fact that women typically have less upper body strength than males, and as a result, may not be able to carry objects or people as easily, and some suspects may be more likely to run from a female officer than a male officer, if the suspects believe they can outrun them. Bisset et al. (2012) also looked at the importance ratings for the core competencies of police work. Out of 11 competencies, physical fitness and physical agility received the lowest overall rating. Gender differences existed in these views: 34% of females rated overall physical fitness as critically important as compared to only 14% of males. Additionally, 28% of females rated overall physical agility as critically important while only 13% of males did. These findings indicate that females are more likely to have a perception that physical fitness and agility are more important to the policing profession than males, despite the fact that they seem to be rarely needed or utilized based on commonly performed work duties.

If these physical abilities are not being used often, then the physical fitness test does not accurately measure the skills required to be a police officer, much less an effective police officer. Bisset et al.'s study (2012) continues with an inquiry into whether police officers believe they can presently perform the requirements of the physical test as they had to previously as a condition of their employment. There were 9 physical tasks measured with a scale of could not perform, could perform with great difficulty, could perform with effort, could perform with little effort, or could perform very well. While answers

varied, not all officers believed that they would be able to easily pass most requirements. Bisset et al (2012) assumed that if an officer indicated that the task could be performed with effort, could perform with great difficulty, or could not perform, there is an implication that he, she, or they could potentially fail this requirement. Based on this assumption, the possible failure rates of police officers surveyed for each of the physical requirements measured are as follows: run 1.5 miles in 12 minutes (72.6%), sprint 300 meters in 57 seconds (59.1%), complete 36 sit ups in one minute (51.2%), complete agility obstacle course (51.1%), vertical jump 19.5 inches (50%), bench press own body weight (49.8%), sit and reach 16.5 inches (48.7%), perform 21 pushups (43.6%), and walking one mile in 18 minutes (20%) (Bisset, Bisset, & Snell 2012).

The finding of this study begs the question: If the requirements do not match common work duties and some police officers cannot presently perform the requirements, are all the physical requirements or the passing rates necessary to see who would make an effective police officer? It seems that once an individual becomes a police officer, they become more relaxed on their physical conditioning as continued fitness does not seem to be a priority or requirement of most police departments. While many departments have physical fitness programs, only a few have mandatory programs (Bisset et al 2012). Additionally, when measuring support for testing fitness and agility among current officers, there was not much support for mandatory testing as less than half of respondents believed that either physical fitness or physical agility testing should be mandatory. Not only is the maintenance of physical fitness and agility not required, but there is very little support for mandatory continued fitness within the police department, probably due to the perception that many would not be able to complete the required standards.

In an article that focuses on whether the inclusion of example physical fitness test requirements in the recruitment content discourages applicants from requesting additional information, Aiello (2019) found that women are more encouraged to apply to be a police officer. Rather than the common assumption that the physical test requirements will deter female applicants, those who were made aware of the requirements were more encouraged to request further information. When comparing the test provided in this article with the ranges in the Bisset et al (2012), the requirements fall near the average for police academies throughout the country. This means that a rough mean was used in this example test, and the range provided could have had an effect on whether females left their contact information, an indication of interest. Had the example test been skewed toward the upper end of the ranges, which would be consistent with the standards in some police academies, some women may have been discouraged to leave information. Future research could determine how variation in the physical test requirements listed in recruitment materials affects interest.

ADDITIONAL BARRIERS

Acceptance into the Police Subculture

Once women complete the physical fitness test, graduate from the academy and enter the policing profession, they are met with additional challenges. The main problem women face today, much like their predecessors, is struggling to be accepted into the police subculture. Women often face the problem of whether they prioritize their identity as a police officer or as a woman. They struggle with balancing the two identities because one allows them greater access to the police subculture. Rabe-Hemp (2009 p. 126) claims that "women do not capture one or the other role of policeWOMAN or POLICEwoman but integrate both in their daily work." This statement highlights that in their acceptance of aspects of the male-dominated subculture females are still reinforcing the traditional conceptions of gendered police work by accepting the differences in the role they play in the police subculture or rather lack of a role. However, more recent research may suggest that female police officers are becoming more accepted in the police subculture. Rose and Unnithan (2014), when studying the police subculture, found evidence that those outside of this subculture experienced more stress, but found that out-group status was not significantly correlated with gender. In other words, female police officers were not significantly more likely to feel like outsiders than their male counterparts. This finding is important in answering the question: Do females lose their femininity and "do masculinity" to assimilate into the work culture?

Harassment, Discrimination, and Disrespect

Additional problems female police officers routinely encounter include harassment, discrimination, and disrespect. These problems can start as early as in the police academy experience and can continue throughout a woman's career (Rabe-Hemp 2009 p. 257). In the study conducted by Rabe-Hemp (2009), she found that the hostility toward female police officers ranged from teasing, joking, isolation, physical assaults, denial of work assignments outside of perceived "women's issues" such as rape, domestic violence, and child abuse, and denial of officer backup assistance. This resistance noted by the 24 women in the study varied in duration, ranging from 2-23 years, and by extent, as it was perpetrated by one person and up to an entire department. In order to cope with work-related issues, the respondents commonly used the following strategies: accepting segregation, bettering themselves, spending time with family, and connecting with others outside of policing. This is a very different work-place dynamic from what is traditionally expected in the workplace, specifically collegiality and inclusivity. Of the women who indicated that they were able to gain status or acceptance in the workplace, they reported doing so "through a show of violence, through achieving a rank that demanded respect, or by being unique or different from male officers" (Rabe-Hemp 2009 p. 261). While there is conflicting research regarding the level of acceptance of women in policing, a common theme is that female officers must prove that they are tough and can "be one of the guys," and even then, levels of acceptance vary. Women should not be made to choose to identify as either a police officer or a woman. This bias against women in policing causes distrust between coworkers that can result in a hostile work environment and even life-threatening outcomes. Female officers have encountered this male-dominated police subculture since the early days of women in policing, and it will continue to produce negative consequences.

Women in policing also face barriers when it comes to salary disparities (i.e., the glass ceiling) and promotional opportunities. Several factors can explain why female police officers make less than their male counterparts and are less likely to advance in the department. These factors are mentioned in two different research articles by Rabe-Hemp (2008, 2009). First, in self-assessments of their performance, women may feel like they lack the competence or sufficient years of experience to apply for promotion. Second, they may be reluctant to apply for promotions because of the work-place issues and resistance they have previously encountered. Third, some women are dissuaded from seeking promotions because of the uncertainty or greater demands in the work schedule, which poses difficulties in family life and childcare responsibilities. Fourth, organization barriers, such as administrative bias, also exist in which females may feel that they were considered for the promotion solely because of their gender, and they did not want to accept it because they felt they did not deserve it or are worried about the backlash from peers for what could be perceived as an unfair and an undeserved professional advancement. Fifth, females anticipated isolation at work should they be promoted and some were satisfied with the status of their careers and did not want to change the routine they currently had, or alternately, the benefits of the promotion were not significant enough to entice them to want to apply. Sixth, a new barrier identified by Arcibold and Hassel (2009) is that marriage to another police officer within the same department may make a woman ineligible for promotion due to nepotism policies.

Stress and Burnout

Because of the many challenges they face in their profession, one may assume that women are more stressed and experience more burnout than their male peers. Surprisingly, previous research notes fewer differences in stress or workplace problems between male and female officers as expected. While some studies have found females report higher stress levels and greater job dissatisfaction as compared to male officers, other studies have found males report higher burnout, though the differences were not statistically significant (Hassell, Archbold, Stichman, 2011; McCarty, Jihong, & Garland 2007). Additionally, no statistically significant differences were noted for workplace problems between males and females (Hassell, Archbold, Stichman, 2011). The only main difference noted was that females held a

more negative perception of themselves, in that they believe their abilities are underestimated based on their physical stature (Hassell, Archbold, Stichman, 2011). In explaining their findings that female and male police officers did not report significantly different levels of occupational stress or burnout, McCarty, Jihong, & Garland (2007) noted similar predictors of stress and burnout for both groups of officers: stress from the workplace environment (e.g., killing someone in the line of fire, fellow officer being killed, gruesome crime scene), bureaucratic characteristics of police organizations (e.g., insufficient input in policy/procedure, disciplinary actions), availability of peer support and trust (e.g., only fellow peers can understand them, policewomen vulnerable to lack of social support), and accessibility of coping mechanisms (e.g., cognitive or behavioral strategy, positive vs negative coping mechanisms). They also uncovered gender-specific stressors: the police organization was unfavorable for female officers (e.g., sex discrimination and irregular working hours), perceptions of inequality (male-dominated profession), and females handle problems in the profession in a different manner than males (females experience tragedy differently). These differences can be due to circumstances related to general stress levels, such as gender discrimination may lead to increased levels of stress and burnout.

In further unpacking differences in work environment and coping variables, males had higher levels of negative exposure (potentially dangerous and traumatic exposures), camaraderie (level of relationships and support among officers), unfairness (type of treatment received from organization and media), and destructive coping mechanisms (negative and avoidance techniques). In comparison, females had higher levels of constructive coping mechanisms (positive, productive, and active responses). Three of the five predictors measured in the article of work-place related stress were also statistically significant among women; these include destructive coping (which contributes most to work related stress), unfairness, and camaraderie. For burnout among females, negative exposure was a significant predictor, while constructive coping was a significant protective factor against burnout. An additional finding that it is important to note is that African American female police officers report significantly higher levels of burnout than other officers, which indicates how race *and* race as well as gender when looking at the problems females face in policing (McCarty, Jihong, & Garland 2007).

In sum, McCarty, Jihong, and Garland (2007) found that males and females do not have statistically significant differences in work-related stress and burnout. Additionally, they looked at variables that contributed to stress and burnout, and the results suggested that “there are relatively few key factors that are related to work-related stress among female officers but these variables are highly crucial after controlling for other effects” (McCarty et al. 2007, p. 684). The predictors for work-related stress and burnout also varied by males and females. The negative exposures variables were a significant predictor of burnout for females but not for work-related stress, which suggests long term cumulative effects for female officers. There were also similarities between male and female officers. Destructive coping mechanisms and perceptions of fairness contributed to work-related stress for both male and female officers. Also, work-related stress was the most important predictor of burnout for male and female officers. These results show that the variables and predictors for work-related stress and burnout vary for males and females even if the levels of stress and burnout were not statistically significant.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Given the barriers that women face when entering policing and the challenges they encounter throughout their career, policing culture remains resistant to women entering this field. Chappell (2008) looked at implementing an alternate form of police academy training to reflect new styles in policing, such as community policing. This study compared the traditional police academy that focused on law, arrest procedure, traffic enforcement, officer safety, firearms training, physical training, defensive tactics, and driving with the new model which focused on communication, diversity, problem solving, and police-community relations. This new model is more consistent with the realities of police work job and “focuses on application of learning rather than memorization, utilizes problem solving model, uses scenarios as the basis for learning, new lesson plans, support materials, in-class examinations, student workbooks, and has new state certification exam (both application and knowledge)” (Chappell 2008, p. 41). Results indicated that women and applicants with higher levels of education were more likely to succeed in this

new model. As such, because the new model focuses on traits often associated to be more feminine, women are especially suited for this modern style of policing.

In a comparative perspective, Ward and Prenzler (2016) examined the experiences of female police officers in other countries to provide avenues of reform in the United States. Common barriers that were mentioned in the article include “small quotas, inappropriate physical entry tests, all-male selection panels, and full-time employment requirements” (Ward & Prenzler 2016 pp 243). Moreover, the possibility exists that females accept the stereotypes related to women in policing which can discourage them from even attempting to enter the field. Consequently, the researchers provide recommendations to increase interest in law enforcement careers among women. Changing fitness requirements to more accurately reflect the work of police officers will allow more women to pursue a career in policing. Greater mentoring will allow women to have greater support and could increase acceptance into the police subculture, which could translate into the retention of female police officers. Increased networking efforts will also broaden the reach to more women who may not have previously considered a career in policing. Increasing the support for female officers and staff will also provide a more inclusive, less hostile environment, since many women do not want to be associated with other women police officers in an effort to decrease resistance on integration into the male police subculture. Transparent selection and promotion procedures will also increase the number of women advancing to higher levels of policing. Many women do not apply for these positions because important information pertaining to the work schedule and additional responsibilities are not provided. Women are usually also the primary caregiver for their children and a promotion with unknown responsibilities and schedule will make their home lives less manageable. Increasing the flexibility of working hours will also positively affect the number of women in policing. By creating part-time positions or flexible work schedules, women will be able to balance their work life with their family responsibilities. Additionally, the creation of a childcare voucher system will allow women with young children to work during the day and save families a sizeable amount of money. Finally, the enhancement of maternity and paternity pay could prove extra incentive for females and males to join the police force, as it would provide the opportunity to take paid leave to raise their child. As can be seen, there are many reforms that can be implemented that would increase the number of women in policing. However, the major obstacles to their actual implementation is funding and an attitudinal and cultural shift that policing could benefit from more female officers.

CONCLUSION

Females who want to become police officers face many barriers. An early and formidable one is the physical fitness test, which causes more female cadets to fail out of the police academy than males. These physical fitness test requirements are also arbitrary numbers that have little to no scientific credibility. Furthermore, the lack of consistency across states and counties also raises the question of fairness as some departments require only a doctor’s note to pass this component while others require fitness standards that even current police officers report they would have difficulty passing. Additionally, as explained above, many of these requirements do not even reflect the tasks and duties that police officers perform regularly. Modifying the physical fitness test or finding a standard test based on scientifically valid criteria would eliminate arbitrary ranges and would provide a more accurate reflection of policing duties.

As explored in this paper, the fitness test is not the only barrier female police officers face. Once females pass this requirement, they face additional challenges including but not limited to harassment, rejection from male police officers, limited opportunities for promotions, and unique stressors and pathways to burnout. Women have a much harder time being accepted as a police officer even though in many cases they complete the same requirements as their male counterparts did when entering this profession. The biases regarding female officers are still prevalent in society today, and the male dominated subculture plays a large role in creating and reinforcing the barriers females face.

Reforms are necessary to disrupt the sexism female police officers encounter. Policing is no longer exclusively a male profession. Even though females compose a small portion of police officers, they earned their positions and these obstacles and difficulties they face only serve to drive them from police work. The reforms explored in this research paper were based on a comparative perspective

focusing on countries with larger populations of women in policing. Importantly, they seem to be working, and by implementing them in the United States, it may increase the number of female officers in policing. Additionally, community policing is a common style in this era with traits that are often considered feminine, such as communication and problem solving rather than punishment and violence. It seems, then, that policing and society would benefit from having more women in police departments given this change in style.

Police work has many barriers for women that need to be remedied. Historically and currently, female police officers face additional challenges based on their sex and gender stereotypes. The male-dominated subculture that has not been welcoming to or accepting of female officers needs to change. Modifications to the entrance requirements are a good first start to reform. Overall, while more females have been able to become police officers and overcome the professional barriers they faced as recruits and as officers police officers, it seems that the physical fitness test still plays the same role it did when it was first implemented. While not to the same extent, it continues to keep women out of policing.

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