



Learning from Leadership:

Perspectives of Women Leaders at the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department



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Executive Summary

Through a partnership with the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD), the Crime and Justice Institute (CJI) set out to understand the experiences of women in leadership positions. CJI conducted 12 one-on-one, virtual interviews with women at the rank of lieutenant and above at LVMPD. Highlights of the themes that emerged from those conversations include:

- This group of women leaders had a wide range of backgrounds and professional interests prior to becoming a police officer.
- Several police leaders recounted that their main reason for becoming a police officer was because they truly wanted to be of service and give back to the community.
- Nearly all the women leaders reported that they felt very fulfilled by their job.
- The physical aspects of the job were mentioned by several people as a deterrent to women choosing law enforcement as a career.
- Another reason cited for the low representation of women in the profession is that a significant number of women doubt that they can balance a career in policing and family life with children.
- The most frequent suggestion for strategies to increase the representation of women in policing was that more women need to be the face of police recruitment efforts.
- The consensus was that almost all LVMPD's formal policies did not affect women specifically either positively or negatively. Interviewees largely believe LVMPD policies to be gender neutral.
- Regarding promotions, interviewees reported that the written exam was generally fair and unbiased but views about oral interviews were more varied, as some believed it to be a fair and unbiased part of promotions and others did not.
- Several women leaders described having a more difficult time than men building and strengthening relationships with work colleagues because doing so often involved spending time together outside of regular shift hours.
- Many leaders noted the continuous pressure they feel to prove themselves at every rank, particularly in instances where they are the first woman to hold a certain position.
- The consensus among leaders was that the LVMPD would benefit from more women, as women officers bring different skills sets to the job that enriches the Department.

Introduction

Law enforcement has long been a male dominated field in the United States and this is especially true in positions of leadership. Women make up only 12% of sworn officers—a proportion which has remained consistent for about 20 years—and they make up less than 5% of police leadership throughout the US.¹ At the same time, research suggests that women bring skills to modern policing that can help to reduce negative outcomes, such as excessive uses of force and complaints, and increase positive outcomes, such as increased community trust and increased cooperation with police.²

Through a partnership with the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD), CJI set out to understand the experiences of women in leadership positions. What steered them to policing? Have their careers been fulfilling? What are their experiences with promotional processes? How have they navigated challenging work environments? Given the reality that so many women who become police officers do not advance to leadership roles, we are interested in learning from women who have successfully navigated promotions and who have long-tenured careers in policing.

CJI conducted 12 one-on-one, virtual interviews with women at the rank of lieutenant and above at LVMPD. This group of long-tenured professionals includes five lieutenants, two captains, two directors, and three deputy chiefs. By virtue of their rank and tenure, interviewees have demonstrated some success in the profession. The interviews were guided by a set of semi-structured questions and this report highlights the prominent themes that emerged from our conversations, illustrated through direct quotes from these police leaders.

Paths to Policing

This group of women leaders had a wide range of backgrounds and professional interests prior to becoming a police officer. Interviewees were asked to reflect on their personal pathways to policing. A few attributed their career to a family member in policing, but many shared that before becoming a police officer, their career aspirations were far from law enforcement. Examples include plans to be in the performing arts, education, social sciences, health care, business, and the beauty industry. Only one of the twelve police leaders recounted that she wanted to be a police officer her whole life.

For many women leaders, it was a brief and sometimes random introduction to policing that served as the spark that got them on their path. A few recalled being in high school or college when a guest speaker from LVMPD spoke and caught their attention. For one, a ride along that provided a real view into what being a police officer

“I was not supposed to be a police officer.”

¹ Hyland, Shelley, and Davis, Elizabeth. Revised 2021. “Local Police Departments, 2016: Personnel.” U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

² Schuck, Amie, and Rabe-Hemp, Cara. 2005. “Women Police: The Use of Force by and Against Female Officers.” *Women & Criminal Justice*, 16(4); Bolger, P. Colin. 2015. “Just Following Orders: A Meta-Analysis of the Correlates of American Police Officer Use of Force Decisions.” *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 40: 466-492; Bergeron, Lindsey, Archbold, Carol A., and Kimberly D. Hassell. 2008. “Complaints of Police Misconduct: Are There Differences Between Male and Female Officers?” *Law Enforcement Executive Forum*, 8(5); Norma M. Riccucci, Gregg G. Van Ryzin, and Cecilia F. Lavena, “Representative Bureaucracy in Policing: Does It Increase Perceived Legitimacy?” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 24, no. 3 (July 2014): 537–551.

was really like was the catalyst. Several others recounted experiences as young adults that inspired them to take action to help others and protect the vulnerable, including young people. Several police leaders described how they witnessed instances in which struggling individuals in challenging situations were given assistance and helped by police officers.

Several recounted that their main reason for becoming a police officer was because they truly wanted to be of service and give back to the community. They saw a career in policing as a way to do that. Some of the interviewees also mentioned their motivation being driven by an interest in enforcing the law and by a sense of justice and accountability.

All 12 police leaders have had lengthy careers in policing, with the average tenure being around 20 years. Notably, most had spent their entire policing career at LVMPD. In fact, at the time of the interview, a few were nearing retirement after having spent their entire career with LVMPD.

Career Fulfillment

Nearly all the women leaders reported that they felt very fulfilled by their job. This sense of fulfillment after an average of two decades as a police officer is notable. Positive sentiments about their lengthy careers were partly attributed to the variety of positions they were able to hold over their careers. After a stint in patrol, interviewees recounted moving through a range of positions such as specialized units, problem solving units, the training academy, and internal affairs. A variety in assignment was perceived as a variety in opportunity; opportunities to learn new skills, interact with different people, and have increased responsibilities.

“Best job in the world. Can’t believe they pay me to do this.”

“If you asked people when I went through the academy if I would be a leader they would have laughed.”

Several of the women leaders shared that they never imagined they would end up in a leadership position in a major police department. It seemed that for many, moving up the chain of command with increasing responsibility was not an aspiration early in their careers.

Why Are Women Underrepresented?

We asked interviewees why they believed women are underrepresented in the policing profession. **The physical aspects of the job were mentioned by several people as a deterrent to women choosing law enforcement as a career.** They described how police are often portrayed as physical and masculine in recruitment campaigns, in movies and television, and in other media coverage. And it was suggested that such images are intimidating to potential women applicants. That said, we heard a divide among the women leaders on whether this portrayal of the physical aspects of the job lined up with reality. Some agreed that it did and expressed the importance of being honest with potential applicants. Others opined that emphasizing the physical aspects of the job was an overly narrow view of what the job entails and, as such, intimidation is misplaced.

Another reason cited for the low representation of women in the profession is that a significant number of women doubt that they can balance a career in policing and family life with children.

The challenges of round-the-clock shift work was not considered a good fit for the demands of family life with young children. One interviewee described her own personal experience as an ongoing challenge of balancing: balancing kids and work, balancing femininity and masculinity, and balancing “soft and hard.” This need to constantly balance home life and work life was also mentioned as a reason for the low level of women in leadership positions.

“You don’t have to look like the hulk to do the job, but that’s what’s often portrayed and that’s not attractive to women to be muscular or masculine.”

Improving Recruitment

These women leaders were asked about their ideas for strategies to help increase the recruitment of women officers. **The most frequent suggestion was that more women need to be the face of police recruitment efforts.** We heard that engaging women police officers in recruitment efforts would help potential women applicants relate to police

“Focus on the good that females are doing rather than focusing on we don’t have enough. If we focus on the good that speaks to others and encourages others and that would naturally fill the gaps. If we keep straightening each other’s crowns there’ll be more out there.”

officers and understand that this is indeed a job for women. Some leaders suggested highlighting women officers who have successfully navigated the job while having a family with young children in recruitment efforts. Other suggested strategies to improve the recruitment of women including having a women’s-only academy preparation group and having targeted recruitment councils.

Gender Bias in Department Policies and Practice

Interviewees were asked if any specific LVMPD policies were thought of as having a positive or negative impact on women officers’ ability to be successful. **The consensus was that almost all LVMPD’s formal policies did not affect women specifically either positively or negatively.** In short, they largely believe LVMPD policies to be gender neutral.

“Culture trumps policy every day of the week.”

However, as conversations about policies unfolded, several individuals raised one notable exception: policy and practice around pregnancy and returning to work after maternity leave. Several interviewees shared personal stories about being pregnant while on the job and returning to work after a maternity leave. Most of them talked about the challenges they experienced during this time. We heard that when a woman is assigned to “light duty” while pregnant, she is typically removed from the street and assigned to front desk duty or camera duty. Such light duty assignments were generally not welcomed by the officers. Several women leaders shared that supervisors struggled with assignments for pregnant officers, with one noting that supervisors do not know what to do with a “pregnant girl who wears a uniform.” Some interviewees explained LVMPD considers a pregnant officer’s doctor’s opinion in determining what pregnant women can and cannot do while on the job. In other words, the appropriate duties for a pregnant officer should be individually tailored and, in part, reflect the perspective of her doctor. Some viewed this positively, in that a medical professional rather than an untrained supervisor had a voice in

job duties while pregnant. For others, the subjectivity of such decisions was problematic. Just as pregnancies differ, so do doctors opinions of what women police professionals can do while pregnant.

Per LVMPD policy, while on light duty status an officer is not eligible for promotion or transfer, which was perceived as differential treatment for expecting parents who are still working. Male officers can be promoted or transferred when they are expecting a child and immediately take leave from their jobs under the federal Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) when a child is born. Yet women officers who are pregnant are unable to be promoted or transferred when they are expecting a child because of their light duty status; a situation considered unfair to women.

“We need to make sure that we are not stalling women’s careers when they have babies.”

“It’s not fair that he could promote while I’m pregnant, but I can’t promote while I’m pregnant.”

Challenges upon returning to work after maternity leave were also raised by these women leaders. This particularly related to accommodating breastfeeding mothers who were not always provided an appropriate, private space to pump and store breastmilk and not allowed regular breaks throughout a shift to pump. Some interviewees expressed that male supervisors in particular did not know how to appropriately accommodate breastfeeding mothers.

For pregnant officers and officers returning to work after maternity leave, the working relationships with direct supervisors, both women and men, were cited as being very important. **Some women leaders recalled their own supportive direct supervisors who worked with them in a problem-solving capacity to identify appropriate or personally fulfilling job duties while pregnant.**

“If you have a great captain, you can find a good job that will not stall your career.”

As one example, during a period of medically-required bedrest, a captain developed and assigned a project that could be done from home. This allowed the pregnant officer the opportunity to continue to work rather than take leave, which was a welcome solution. Another interviewee recalled a similar story of a supportive captain who proactively and collaboratively conceived of duties while she was pregnant that were fulfilling to her.

Promotions and Mentoring

All 12 of the women leaders with whom we spoke were of the rank of lieutenant or higher. Thus, all participated in the promotional process at LVMPD at least twice, and for many, more than twice. We inquired about the extent to which they considered promotions fair and unbiased. When promoting to sergeant, lieutenant, and captain at LVMPD, the process includes both a written exam and an oral interview. **The written exam was generally thought to be fair and unbiased**, as individual scoring is based on objective and consistent answer keys. Several leaders noted that any person who studies and works hard enough can do well on the written test. **Views about oral interviews were more varied, as some believed it to be a fair and unbiased part of promotions and others did not.** For some, oral interviews were subjective and could be based on an individual’s reputation and the strength of their relationships with personnel higher up in the Department. Several women leaders asserted that gender biases were a factor and that some raters of oral interviews had biases against women that resulted in lower scores relative to their male counterparts. For example, one interviewee explained that she swore during her

oral interview and received a comment that her profanity was offensive. She asked if she was the only one interviewed who used this kind of language and was told no, but after asking other candidates, to her knowledge, she was the only one documented for the behavior.

Several women leaders with whom we spoke described having a more difficult time than men building and strengthening relationships with work colleagues because doing so often involved spending time together outside of regular shift hours. These women expressed a reluctance to fraternize with male colleagues outside of work for fear of the impact on their own reputation. For example, if a woman officer has dinner or drinks with a male supervisor or of higher rank, a fear exists that other staff would speculate that they were involved in an intimate relationship. Men, it was described, can get together with colleagues and supervisors outside of work hours without risk of rumor or damage to their reputation. Women are limited in their ability to develop relationships with personnel at higher ranks who can potentially advocate for them during a promotional process. This dynamic became more pronounced as individuals progressed to higher ranks in the Department.

“It’s not possible for me to build relationships because people make assumptions if I have lunch with someone.”

“We constantly see the guys who don’t have the same tenure or abilities get the promotion or position, versus women who have the tenure and abilities but don’t have the relationships.”

“My career was shaped by being a wife and mother.”

We inquired about the timing of going for a promotion and an individual’s factors behind that decision. Some women mentioned making decisions about promotions taking into consideration when they wanted to grow their family or the age of their children. Some noted that they wanted their kids to be a certain age before increasing their professional responsibilities. A few women even said that they personally endeavored to time their pregnancies around promotional exams.

An additional factor related to the timing of promotions is a personal feeling of competency. **These leaders knew they were ready for promotion when they felt sufficiently confident and competent in their current role.** Some referenced their belief that they could do a better job than their current supervisor as a motivating factor. Notably, many recalled being encouraged by mentors and leaders in the Department to strive for a promotion. This encouragement by colleagues was frequently attributed to their becoming the leaders they are today.

“Even before the testing process, there’s a disparity in opportunity and mentorship in the agency.”

Mentorship—mostly informal and from individuals of higher rank—was cited as a key in their upward trajectories. Several mentioned the benefits of “Women of Metro,” a group established outside the formal structure of LVMPD that strives to improve the experiences and representation of women in policing.

Culture and Work Environment

We asked women how Departmental culture and work environment influenced their lives as police officers. **Many noted the continuous pressure they feel to prove themselves at every rank, particularly in instances where they are the first woman to hold a certain position.** Despite a track record of doing good work, they reported an assumption on the part of some male colleagues that women cannot do a job until proven otherwise. This was framed in contrast to men, who others assume can do a job until proven otherwise. Women officers said they have to be better than a “middle grade male” who has good relationships with personnel at higher ranks that could protect them when poor performance occurs. One interviewee described her perception of a double standard when it comes to how officers are treated for certain behavior. She gave the example of a man leaving a shift early to attend an event for his child, and colleagues viewing him as being a great dad. Yet, a woman leaving early for the same reason would be perceived as not being committed to the job.

According to one woman leader, despite the existence of harassment policies, they did not change the culture of the men police officers, especially those in positions of authority. In her mind, such policies did not help prevent a hostile work environment but rather, merely created paperwork.

“I do feel bad sometimes that I’m harder on women because I want them to represent us well.”

Interviewees expressed that at times they felt a sense of competition or high expectations from other women at LVMPD. And such competition was described as unnecessarily harsh at times.

While we heard generally similar characterizations about the culture and work environment, a division emerged from these leaders regarding whether anything should be done about it. Some asserted that women officers should accept the culture and if they didn’t, then they were likely not a good fit for the profession. Some interviewees believed women need to be comfortable being one of the guys and being around those who make inappropriate comments. If women “care about being [politically correct] all the time, it’s going to be hard for them to fit in.” However, others expressed an interest in wanting to keep pushing to change culture and make it more welcoming for women officers. That said, some noted the delicate balance of pushing for a more welcoming culture and “playing the female card,” which was viewed as potentially damaging to women in the profession.

“There are diversity and harassment policies like every other corporation, but it doesn’t stop or change the culture. It doesn’t change the mindset of male police officers who resent females, specifically ones in authority positions.”

“The one thing that hasn’t changed for me no matter how high I’ve gone is that women have to continually prove themselves.”

Some women leaders commented on progress they have witnessed over their careers regarding the acceptance of women in the profession. For one, they cited the increase in the number of women officers at LVMPD over the last two decades. Second, they highlighted pathways to leadership positions and overall upward mobility for women at LVMPD that was reported not to exist early in their careers. The growing numbers of women as captains, directors, and deputy chiefs were referenced. As the number of women in the Department has increased, so has the diversity of women. What was once thought to be a homogenous group of women entering policing is no longer the case, as all kinds of women were joining the ranks. This was thought to be encouraging for recruitment efforts and increasing the representation of women in policing.

“We are not where we used to be. I don’t see it or feel it. There are some continued problems, but a lot of successful [women] that have been very amazing at what they do, still strongly representing and owning it as a woman. They’ve embraced life and worked hard. They have truly paved the way for me and for many others.”

Benefits to More Women in Policing

Women leaders were asked about whether the Department would benefit from increased representation of women and, if so, why. **The consensus was that the LVMPD would benefit from more women. The most frequently mentioned reason is that women bring different skills sets to the job that enriches the Department.** Communication and empathy skills were mentioned as particular strengths, where women use their “mind, mouth, and heart” before resorting to other means. Such an approach can help de-escalate volatile situations. A few noted that in some instances suspects do not see women officers as threats compared to male officers, which may better position women officers to slow down situations. We heard that women are often able to put themselves in the shoes of the person with whom they are dealing and listen attentively without having to speak. This combination of skills was thought to lead to fewer inappropriate uses of force.

Some also wanted to be clear that increasing the representation of women in policing still needed to be done with an eye toward recruiting women who would be a good fit for the job. Many of these women leaders were not supportive of increasing the percentage of women just for the sake of having more women. Making sure that recruits continue to be of high-quality was thought to be important as well.

Notably, several of the women wanted to clarify that women and men can bring different strengths to the job but that such differences do not equate to being better or worse - just different. These women leaders felt that officers should be allowed and encouraged to leverage and contribute their unique skills.

Conclusion

Our conversations with 12 officers at the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department were intended to gain insights into the experiences and opinions of women who have had long-tenured careers as police officers and who have demonstrated some success in the profession by nature of their promotions and ranks. These conversations illustrated a diversity in perspectives on some issues and a strong consensus on others. These professional women, by and large, feel fulfilled by their careers and have positive views of the Department. Many supported increasing the representation of women in the Department and suggested a greater role for women in recruitment efforts and de-emphasizing the physical aspects of the

job as two strategies to do that. While most interviewees believe that LVMPD policies as a whole are not biased against women, the Department's handling of pregnant officers and officers returning from maternity leave is an area thought to be in need of improvement. Women moving up the ranks in LVMPD was largely viewed as a fair process and welcome by leadership. However, building relationships with colleagues became an increasingly significant factor in upward mobility. Cultural obstacles and constraints of family life were thought to be challenges to women officers at higher ranks. Women leaders were divided on whether such cultural obstacles were something that needed to be changed. Our conversations showed that women can bring a different set of skills and experiences to the profession relative to their male counterparts. Leaders were quick to clarify that differences were not to imply that women officers are better or worse than men officers but rather, bring a richness to the job that benefits all.

Appendix: Interview Questions

Motivation and Recruitment

1. Why did you choose policing as a profession? What were your personal motivations for becoming a police officer?
2. In general, has your experience met your expectations for a career in policing? How or how not?
3. In your opinion and from your experience, why are women so underrepresented in the policing profession? Are there things that are deterring women from applying?
4. What are some recruitment strategies that you think would be particularly effective to increase the representation of women in policing?

Policies and Practices

5. Are there certain policies or practices that are particularly helpful to you being a successful woman police officer? Please explain.
6. Are there certain policies or practices that make it particularly difficult as a woman to be successful or that negatively impact your job satisfaction? Please explain.
7. What policies or practices would be the most effective at retaining women as police officers in your opinion?

Promotions and Professional Development

8. Do you think that promotion process was fair and unbiased? If no, please describe what about the process was not fair or unbiased.
9. Is the climate one that is supportive of women applying for promotions? Please explain why or why not.
10. Are there any particular policies or practices that serve as barriers for women to promotion? Please explain.
11. What factors or people have been the most significant to your career development and advancement?
12. Do you desire to be promoted again? If no, why not? If yes, what are the factors in your decision about when to apply?

Culture and Work Environment

13. In your opinion, has the work environment or organizational culture been a factor in your job performance or job satisfaction as a woman officer? If so, please explain.
14. What changes would you like to see in terms of the culture of policing that would have a positive impact on your overall job satisfaction as a woman police officer?

