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**Attitudes of Male Police Officers Towards Their Female Peers in the  
Arlington, Texas Police Department**

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## **ABSTRACT**

As more women enter the field of law enforcement, the degree to which they are received as equals among men in this male-dominated profession should be an area of concern to police executives. Studies indicate that many female police officers do not feel accepted by their male colleagues, and many male officers are hesitant to work along side, or for, women. The purpose of the study is to determine what the attitudes of male police officers in the Arlington Police Department are towards females working in the field of law enforcement. The study will compare and contrast the attitudes of veteran officers with at least 20 years of experience, and rookie officers within two years of their academy release. The researcher designed a survey instrument to gather data. The original study was conducted in 2001; it was replicated in 2005. The research indicates that male officers in the Arlington Police Department are more tolerant of working with female officers and for female supervisors than departments cited in previous documents. The study yielded similar results in both 2001 and 2005.

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## INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement has long been considered a masculine career and is certainly a male-dominated profession. However, the number of women filling positions as police officers grows every year. Most agencies are actively recruiting women to join their ranks in an effort to have the make-up of the department reflect that of the community it serves. The women that choose policing as a career are expected to be professional equals to their male counterparts. Since more women are choosing to work in law enforcement, the degree to which they are accepted as equals among their male peers has become an area of concern among police professionals. Studies show that female police officers do not feel their male colleagues accept them on the job. In 1995, Fletcher reported that 87% of female police officers had experienced some type of hostility from male peers. More recently, Gossett and Williams (1998) interviewed female police officers in a large, metropolitan police department and found that 63% had reported some type of discrimination from their male coworkers. With women underrepresented in the field of police work, and many agencies working hard to increase the number of female officers on the job, it is important to examine how well they are accepted among their male peers.

The author of this study currently serves as supervisor of the Arlington, Texas Police Department. This department, like most major municipal police agencies, is struggling to recruit, hire, and maintain quality female police officers. The purpose of the study is to determine what the attitudes of male police officers in the Arlington Police Department are towards females working in the field of law enforcement. It will be significant to determine if biases or negative attitudes exist, since non-acceptance of women in the field could lead to fewer women applying to the academy and higher turnover rates among current female officers.

The objective of this study is to determine if male officers in the Arlington (TX) Police Department are comfortable working with, around, or for a female police officer. Specifically, the study will determine if male officers:

- believe women can perform the duties of police patrol officer
- believe women are better suited for non-patrol assignments
- believe women can serve in leadership positions in the department, such as supervisor, training officer, or academy instructor
- believe women are able to represent the department professionally
- believe women are promoted and assigned based on merit as opposed to gender

In addition, the study will compare the attitudes of 20-year veteran officers to those of officers with less than two-year's experience. The researcher will design a survey instrument to gather this data.

There are two specific hypotheses that will be tested. The first is that Arlington police officers are more accepting of females in their ranks than other departments listed in the research. This hypothesis is based on the belief that the Arlington Police Department has a reputation among police agencies of being highly progressive. The department requires a Bachelor's Degree for admission to the academy, so most officers have experienced interaction with females in their college classes and should be more acclimated to working around them. The second hypothesis to be tested is that younger officers are more comfortable than senior officers when working with women. This belief is based in an assumption that the older, veteran officers will hold more traditional views of sex roles at work and are more likely to believe that police work is a masculine profession.

If the hypotheses are proven correct, there are several applications for the results. Police administrators and other city leaders in Arlington should be tremendously pleased that such a progressive department protects the city. As other studies indicate, this is not the norm. These results could also be used as a recruiting tool for the department. In a time when quality female police academy applicants are at a premium, it would encourage a female considering a career in Arlington to know that the male officers in the department would be open to working with them.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Although police agencies have been in existence for hundreds of years, the first department in the United States to appoint a female with full police powers was the Los Angeles Police Department in 1910 (Fletcher, 1995). It was not until 1968 that a major municipality, Indianapolis, assigned the first female officers to patrol with male colleagues (Lonsway, 2003). At that time, women who were interested in a law enforcement career were discouraged from applying by the agencies and often turned away without reason. The passing of the 1972 Equal Employment Opportunity Act made it illegal to deny a job to qualified female police academy applicants (Fletcher). It now appears that women seem to have overcome some of the barriers to their gaining entry in the field of law enforcement. Today, if a qualified female applies, there is a good chance she will be hired. Studies indicate that about 20% of both current applicants and recruits hired are female (Swanson, Territo, & Taylor, 1993). However, women are still greatly underrepresented in police work. Consider the fact that 46% of American workers are female (Martinez, 1997), but women represent only 13% of our police officers (National Center for Women & Policing, 2002). Still, this is a tremendous increase from 1991, when women represented only nine percent of the country's sworn law enforcement officers (Price, 1996).

Once a female police officer finds a job, it is likely she will feel unaccepted at work. As stated in the introduction, Fletcher reported in 1995 that 87% of female police officers had experienced some type of hostility from male peers and Gossett and Williams (1998) found that 63% of female police officers in one major police department had actually reported some type of discrimination from their male coworkers. They found the biggest complaint among the women is not being “taken seriously” by their male peers. Subsequent studies have confirmed that women feel male officers do not accept them on the job (Price; also US Department of Justice, 1998).

It appears this “perception” may in fact be reality. Research clearly shows that a number of male police officers are not comfortable working side-by-side with women and that many men think females simply are not capable of performing the duties of law enforcement. In 1988, Balkin found that male police officers tend to dismiss female officers as incapable of performing police work because of cultural values about sex roles and work. Brown (1994) conducted studies with 280 male patrol officers from 16 different agencies in the Pacific Northwest and found that only 33% accepted female officers in police work. Price’s extensive research, published in 1996, found a great deal of resistance from men to co-exist with their female peers, especially among those male officers assigned to specialized units (such as detectives, SWAT, K9, etc.). Even a recent Gallup poll of officers, published by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (1998), found women were not consistently welcome in the field of law enforcement.

Additional research has shown that the problem of male police officers not accepting women in their ranks is not exclusive to American agencies. Pope and Pope (1986) tested their hypothesis that British policemen hold a traditional view of women’s social roles, leading to

negative attitudes toward policewomen. After interviewing male officers, they found evidence that supports their hypothesis. In conducting a three-way, cross-cultural comparison of police officers in Australia, the British Isles, and the United States, Brown (1998) concluded that the reluctance to accept women on equal terms in policing appears to be “universal.” Even before male police officers start their careers, they seem to have negative attitudes about women in police work. Austin and Hummer (1994) conducted a replication of a 1981 study that found a large number of male criminal justice college students did not want to work in the field with females. Their findings revealed that almost half of the students questioned were skeptical about women in this occupation.

The idea that women cannot perform the tasks associated with police work does not seem to be based in fact. Current research shows that women are capable of accomplishing most tasks as adequately as their male peers. In her work, Lonsway (2003) refers to several studies that show female officers are proven to be as competent as their male counterparts. She reports that women are just as capable as men in some areas and actually excel in many aspects of law enforcement, including handling domestic assault cases, implementing community-oriented policing, and reducing the likelihood of excessive force being used. There is also support for women in policing from the citizens they serve. Research shows that the public does not view female police officers as a liability. A study of the residents of Washington, DC indicates that citizens have the same level of respect for female officers as they do for male officers (Police Research Foundation, 1990). More recently, residents of the Louisville, KY metropolitan area were surveyed, and researchers found positive citizen attitudes toward female police officers on patrol and a decrease in skepticism about female officers’ ability to handle violent encounters (Leger, 1997).



## **METHODOLOGY**

The objective of this study is to determine if male officers in the Arlington (TX) Police Department are comfortable working with, around, or for a female police officer. In addition, the study will compare the attitudes of 20-year veteran officers to those of officers with less than two-year's experience. There are two specific hypotheses that will be tested. The first is that Arlington police officers are more accepting of females in their ranks than other departments listed in the research. This hypothesis is based on the Arlington Police Department's reputation among police agencies as being highly progressive. The department's policy of requiring a Bachelor's Degree for admission to the academy has been in place since 1990. Therefore, most officers have experienced interacting with females in their college classes and should be more acclimated to working around women. The second hypothesis to be tested is that younger officers are more comfortable working with women than senior officers are. This belief is based in an assumption that the older, veteran officers will hold more traditional views of sex roles at work and will be more likely than the younger officers to believe that police work is a masculine profession. Also, the veteran officers joined the department before the college degree requirement and will not have the experience of attending classes with female students. The researcher originally tested these hypotheses in 2001. The study has been replicated for 2005.

The researcher sought the opinions of the most senior, non-supervisory male police officers, as well as that of the least senior, younger male officers. This study was limited to male patrol officers with 20 or more years experience with the department, and male patrol officers with less than two years experience with the department. In 2001, the Arlington Police Department had 501 sworn police officers; 79 (or 16%) of these officers were female. There were 21 male patrol officers with at least 20 years of work experience and 20 male patrol officers

with less than two years of work experience. At that time, the researcher chose to poll all 41 of these officers. Today, there are 522 sworn officers in the Arlington Police Department and 85 of them are female (still 16%). However, there are now significantly more male officers with over 20 years' tenure. As a result, for the 2005 study the researcher polled the 20 most senior male patrol officers, along with the 20 least senior male patrol officers, for a total sample of 40 officers.

The researcher designed a survey with 11 statements for each respondent. An additional three statements were posed for veteran officers to gauge if their opinions had changed since they began their careers. Statements relate to the male officers' beliefs on whether or not women can perform the duties of police officer, patrol officer, or supervisor in the department. Other statements regard the male officers' opinions on a female officer's ability to portray professionalism and promote on merit. Respondents were directed to respond to each statement in a semantic-differential manner by circling the response to the statement that "best represented" their "feeling or opinion." The respondents were able to choose "strongly agree," "agree," "don't know," "disagree," and "strongly disagree" as a response to each statement.

In July of 2001, and again in January of 2005, the researcher hand-delivered copies of the survey to each respondent's employee mailbox at their respective duty station. A cover letter was attached to each copy with instructions on how and when to return the survey to the researcher. Per the letter, the respondents were given five days to complete the survey; this allowed for any respondent who was on his day off to return and have time to complete the instrument. They were also instructed to return the survey by employee inter-office mail; this allowed for the document's return with no charge, eliminating any financial concern the respondents might have

had. The cover letter expressed that the opinions and beliefs of each officer would remain confidential. No respondent had any prior knowledge of the survey.

In the 2001 survey, 20 of the 41 surveys were returned, for a return rate of 49%. Nine of the 21 veteran officers returned their survey (43%). Younger officers provided a slightly better rate of return; 11 of the 20 officers returned the survey (55%). In 2005, 14 of 40 surveys were returned, for a return rate of 35%. Only four of the 20 veteran officers returned the survey (20%), while 10 of the 20 younger officers participated (50%).

## **FINDINGS**

The intra-department research of the Arlington Police Department yielded similar results in both the 2001 and 2005 surveys. There were only slight differences.

In the 2001 study, the majority of male officers surveyed believe women can be successful in the field. The men also appear comfortable working along side females on patrol. Seventeen of the 20 respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that women can “successfully perform the duties of police officer.” One veteran officer was not sure, and only two officers (both veterans) disagreed. Seventeen of 20 also said they were either comfortable or very comfortable working with a female officer while on patrol. And, again, only two veterans did not support women on patrol. The physical strength of the female officers is not a big concern among the male officers; 13 of 20 agreed that women were strong enough to handle the tasks of the job. Only three officers (again, veterans) disagreed that women possessed the strength to perform their duties. Ironically, though, half of the officers believe there are times when a female would be physically harmed in an altercation where a male would escape injury. The men tend to see no reason to move women into safer, non-patrol assignments; 16 of 20 disagreed that women are better suited for these positions. The respondents also appear to be comfortable with women

in positions of authority, as indicated by 16 of 20 agreeing that they are comfortable with female instructors, 17 of 20 agreeing that women are capable as Field Training Officers, and 18 of 20 reporting that they would be comfortable with working for female supervisors. Most of the men (18 of the 20) think women police officers portray a “professional image.”

Although more of the men disagree than agree that the “public would want a male officer responding to their call for help” (9 vs. 5), six of the respondents are not sure. When it comes to the issue of female officers getting promotions or special assignments based on merit, there is a similar uncertainty. Most men agree that women earn their assignments (11 of 20), but there are six who are unsure.

Regarding the possibility that the veteran officers have changed their opinions of women over the years, it appears to be split. Four report they have changed their views (one strongly) and four have not. However, more of the veterans agree that they now feel more comfortable working with women than they did 20 years ago (5 to 3; 1 unsure). Six of the nine veterans disagree that they feel less comfortable working with women now than they did at the beginning of their careers.

Although there was a smaller return rate for the 2005 survey, the results were relatively similar. Male officers still believe women can be successful in law enforcement and the men remain comfortable working along side females on patrol. Thirteen of the 14 respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that women can “successfully perform the duties of police officer.” Only one officer disagreed. Twelve of 14 said they were either comfortable or very comfortable working with a female officer while on patrol. Only two officers did not feel at ease with women on patrol. Eight of 14 agreed that women were physically strong enough to handle the tasks of the job; only four officers disagreed that women possessed the strength to perform their duties.

And, true to the 2001 results, about half of the officers (6 of 14) believe there are times when a female would be physically harmed in an altercation where a male would escape injury. The trend continues with 10 of 14 disagreeing that women are better suited for non-patrol positions. In 2005, the respondents are overwhelmingly comfortable with women in positions of authority. Twelve of 14 are comfortable with female instructors and Field Trainers and 11 of 14 state they would be comfortable with a female supervisor. Almost all of the men (13 of 14) think women police officers portray a “professional image.” Uncertainty remains among the men when asked about who they think the public would rather see answering calls. Five men feel the public would rather see a male officer answering their call, but another five are not sure. Veteran officers still agree that they now feel more comfortable working with women than they did 20 years ago (3 of 4) and all 4 veterans disagree that they feel less comfortable working with women now than they did at the beginning of their careers.

There were two noticeable differences between the 2001 and 2005 findings. In 2001, the few officers that were uncomfortable working alongside women, felt female officers could not successfully perform the duties of the job, or thought women were not strong enough to perform the tasks of police work, were all veteran officers. However, in the recent study, the only negative responses in these categories came from the younger officers. The other difference involves the issue of female officers getting promotions or special assignments based on merit. Almost half of the respondents (6 of 14) felt women were given preferential treatment when it came to promotions; only two of the 14 officers surveyed felt that women in the department actually earn their assignments.

## CONCLUSION

Law enforcement continues to be looked upon as a masculine profession, but in the Arlington Police Department women are a welcomed addition to the blue line. The first hypothesis posed in this work is that Arlington police officers are more accepting of females in their ranks than other police agencies. The study clearly supports this. Previous studies found by this researcher indicate that only about one-third of male police officers want female officers working with them on patrol. In Arlington, however, it appears it is not an issue for male officers that they must work side-by-side with females. Almost 90% of male officers polled think that women can do the job. In fact, it is not a problem for these officers to work as subordinates to females of higher rank. Only a mere eight percent of the sample (3 of 34) indicated that they were uncomfortable with a female boss. The researcher suspected the results would be favorable, but this figure is especially surprising. These attitudes are a result of the professionalism of the personnel employed by the department.

The second hypothesis tested is that younger officers will be more comfortable working with women than senior officers. Again, this is the case. Only one younger officer indicated that he felt women could not be successful as police officers. In fact, in the 2001 survey, none of the younger officers reported *any* problem working with females, learning from female instructors, training under a female, or working under a female supervisor. This can possibly be attributed to the fact that all of these officers are college educated. These younger officers have experienced working with females in an academic environment. The results indicate that they have been exposed to more progressive ideas about sex roles than the older officers who may hold more traditional sex-role values.

Although the officers are highly accepting of women on patrol, it does appear that the men are still somewhat concerned for the safety of their female peers. The majority of the male officers feel women are physically fit enough to handle the job. Still, most of the men feel that it is more likely that a female officer will get hurt in a confrontation than a male (16 to 15). This is possibly because of traditional values, especially strong in this region of the country, that men should protect women from harm.

As pleasing as the results are, there are some assumptions made by this writer. It should not go unnoticed that I have only 34 opinions from the department's 437 male officers. This is the result of delimitation; a larger sampling would give the research more reliable results.

There are several applications for these results. Police administration and other city leaders in Arlington should be tremendously pleased that such a progressive department protects the city. As other studies indicate, this is not the norm. These results should also be used as a recruiting tool for the department. In a time when quality female police academy applicants are at a premium, it would encourage a female considering a career in Arlington to know that the male officers in the department would be open to working with them.

This study opens the door to a number of potential future studies. The opinions of the department's men are evident, but what about the women? Past studies in other agencies have sought the view of the female officer. There are 85 commissioned female officers in Arlington and a survey of their perceived acceptance would shed even more light on the progressiveness of the department. Research could also be conducted on officers of different ranks throughout the department. Another possible area of exploration is the opinion of the citizens of the city. A majority of the male officers surveyed believe that the citizens we serve are just as satisfied with

the work of the female officers, but there are a number of them (11 of 34) who do not know. This clearly opens the door for a public opinion survey.

### **Summary**

Research indicates that male police officers do not widely accept females as peers. Past studies also indicate that male criminal justice students have the same view. It was the opinion of this researcher that his employer, the Arlington (TX) Police Department would have a greater acceptance rate of females among the male patrol officers. It was also the author's opinion that younger patrol officers, with less than two years police experience, would be even more tolerant of females as coworkers than senior officers with over 20 years police experience. The researcher tested these two hypotheses by administering a survey to a sample of officers from both of these populations. The survey sought the opinions of the officers in the areas of working with, for, and training under female police officers. The results of the survey support both of the researcher's hypotheses.

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