



WOMEN IN LAW ENFORCEMENT:

Strengthening Our Profession



For more than a century, women have quietly revolutionized law enforcement, yet their impacts are still under the radar. Their contributions have strengthened public trust, enhanced community relations, and improved policing outcomes. But despite these advancements, women remain significantly underrepresented in law enforcement, facing persistent barriers to recruitment, retention, and advancement to leadership roles. In agencies across the country, the challenge is not just increasing the number of female officers but also creating environments where they are empowered to thrive. By recognizing the value of female officer's unique contributions and implementing meaningful reforms to encourage more women to join the profession, we can build a stronger, more effective workforce that better reflects and serves America's communities.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WOMEN IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

Women have played a key role in law enforcement since the establishment of America's first police departments in the 1800s. In fact, several California women were early trailblazers: Alice Wells became the nation's first "policewoman" with the LAPD in 1910, followed by Margaret Adams as the first female deputy sheriff with the Los Angeles County Sheriffs' Department in 1912.¹ The role of women in law enforcement continued to steadily expand throughout the mid- to late-1900s, especially after Title VII of the Civil Rights Act outlawed gender discrimination in public employment.



Today, women make up approximately 14% of sworn officers and 20% of recruits in state and local law enforcement agencies across the United States.²



Less than 9% of police chiefs across the United States are women.³

FEMALE OFFICERS IMPROVE COMMUNITY TRUST AND POLICING OUTCOMES

Having more women in law enforcement not only benefits law enforcement as a profession, but the community as a whole. Gender diversity in law enforcement enhances operational effectiveness, strengthens community trust, and fosters a more equitable workplace. Research shows that increasing the representation of women in law enforcement leads to positive outcomes, including:

- Decreased use of force and excessive force less often⁴
- Less frequent but more effective searches for contraband⁵
- Improved public perception of trustworthiness and compassion⁶
- Better outcomes for crime victims, including sexual assault victims⁷

"The reason why we do this job is really because we love our country, we love our community, we love our own families, and we want to share that with others to provide a safe place for us to grow and live and thrive."

– Alisha Rosa, Vice President of the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Employees' Benefits Association (SEBA)

CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

Despite some improvements in the number of women serving in law enforcement in recent decades and repeated research showing the benefits of adding more women to the force, women face significant challenges that impact their recruitment, retention, and career advancement.

- **Female Representation in Officer Ranks:** Policing is seen as a male-dominated profession, and because there are fewer female role models for prospective peace officers, they may be discouraged from beginning their law enforcement career.
- **Workplace Culture & Gender Bias:** A poll by Police1 found that workplace culture and environment are cited as the biggest barrier to women entering law enforcement.⁸ An internal culture adverse to women can result in female officers receiving fewer high profile assignments and leadership roles, and even exiting the profession.
- **Work-Life Balance and Family Support Policies:** A lack of flexible work policies and inadequate childcare options create significant challenges for female officers with families. Shift work, unpredictable hours, and the high demands of the job often make it difficult for women to balance professional and personal responsibilities.



40% of U.S. agencies - nearly 7,200 - have zero full-time female officers.⁹

"I grew up in an underserved community and was the first in my family to graduate college - I've never shied away from challenges. Starting my career in a male-dominated field like law enforcement was no different. I've faced barriers, but I was determined to succeed and to serve my community. As a wife, mother, probation officer, and leader in law enforcement, I know representation matters - there's room for women in this profession, and I'm living proof."

- Veronica Limon, Vice President, San Diego County Probation Officer's Association

NATIONAL PROGRAMS MAKING A DIFFERENCE: 30X30 INITIATIVE

The 30x30 Initiative is a nationwide coalition of police leaders, researchers, and professional organizations committed to increasing the representation of women in law enforcement to 30% by the year 2030. The Initiative collaborates with law enforcement agencies to implement strategies that support the recruitment, retention, and advancement of women in policing - including revising policies, enhancing workplace culture, and providing resources tailored to the unique challenges faced by female officers.



As of 2025, over 400 law enforcement agencies have taken the 30x30 pledge, demonstrating a nationwide commitment to fostering gender diversity in law enforcement.¹⁰

"We're committed to improving policing—making it fairer, addressing barriers, and ensuring women's unique needs are met. We examine what attracts women to the profession—and what pushes them out. Our work focuses on recruitment, hiring, and other critical processes and strategies. We help agencies evaluate their policies and practices to ensure fairness and eliminate bias. But the toughest challenge? Transforming organizational culture—changing the way an agency operates from the inside out."

- Dr. Tanya Meisenholder, Director of Gender Equity for the Policing Project at NYU School of Law and Lead of the 30x30 Initiative¹¹

CALIFORNIA IS COMMITTED TO PROGRESS

Many California law enforcement agencies across the state have implemented initiatives to increase the number of women in their ranks.

San Diego Police Department Childcare Center

In 2024, after an effort led by the San Diego Police Officers Association, SDPD opened the doors to the nation's first childcare center tailored to the unique needs of peace officers' families. The center accommodates the non-traditional schedules of peace officers, with hours from 5 AM to 10 PM, and provides emergency call out services to an employee's home when needed.¹²

"The SDPOA takes pride in leading the development of innovative solutions that aid in recruiting, retaining and enhancing working conditions for our officers. Establishing a childcare center that caters to the unique needs of our members is vital, especially for parents who dedicate their lives to protecting the City while on duty."

– Jared Wilson, President of the San Diego Police Officers Association¹³

Sacramento Police Department 30x30 Pledge

In 2022, the Sacramento Police Department joined the nationwide 30x30 initiative – a commitment to increasing the number of female sworn officers to 30% by 2030. Since then, they have implemented several programs to support the recruitment, retention, and advancement of female officers in their department, including mentorship programs, fitness test modifications, and wellness initiatives.



California is leading the charge to improve the representation and experiences of women in law enforcement - 49 agencies have signed the 30x30 pledge, currently more than any other state.¹⁴

Los Angeles Airport POA Women Leadership & Empowerment Conference

Since 2021, the Los Angeles Airport Peace Officers Association (LAAPOA) has held an annual Women's Leadership and Empowerment Conference. The event brings together public safety professionals from around the state to network and hear from accomplished female leaders in the fields of law enforcement, finance, and mental health and wellness.

"This event provides a safe space where officers can listen and learn about different topics that are specifically chosen to make the stressful job of being a law enforcement officer more manageable. No one succeeds alone, and it is so important to have a mentor and be a mentor in order to continue climbing up."

– Ruth Delgado, Board Member of the LAAPOA¹⁵

Women Leaders in Law Enforcement Training Symposium

Each year, the California Police Chiefs Association hosts the Women Leaders in Law Enforcement (WLLE) Training Symposium to provide education, professional development, and networking opportunities for women in policing. WLLE was founded in 1987 when a group of about 20 women met to connect over their shared experiences in law enforcement.



Since its inception, the WLLE Conference has grown significantly, with more than **1,700 attendees** each year.

WHAT'S NEXT: POLICIES TO BROADEN PATHWAYS INTO LAW ENFORCEMENT FOR WOMEN

To build upon the progress that has already been made, PORAC is committed to continuing to address gender disparities in law enforcement by advocating for policies that improve workplace culture and increase the recruitment and retention of female officers. We recommend:



Strengthening recruitment and retention efforts by developing recruitment campaigns that specifically engage young women and underrepresented groups through mentorship programs, career fairs, and partnerships with schools, colleges, and community organizations.



Enhancing workplace policies and resources to support working parents by providing on-site childcare options, childcare stipends, and/or partnerships with local childcare providers and advocating for policies that expand childcare programs like the Providing Childcare for Police Officers Act.



Improving growth opportunities for women by expanding pathways to leadership for women officers to advance through mentorship, training, and professional development programs.

Advancing diversity in law enforcement benefits officers, agencies, and the communities we serve. By implementing targeted recruitment strategies, improving workplace policies, and fostering an inclusive culture, we can ensure that all officers have the support, resources and opportunities they need to thrive.

¹ <https://www.police1.com/police-history/articles/police-history-the-evolution-of-women-in-american-law-enforcement-wMo8P1wLSxGQRes9/>

² <https://30x30initiative.org/#:~:text=How%20we're%20changing%20policing,needs%20and%20foster%20their%20success.>

³ <https://www.zippia.com/chief-of-police-jobs/demographics/>

³ <https://bjs.ojp.gov/document/psleap20.pdf>

⁴ P. Colin Bolger, "Just Following Orders: A Meta-Analysis of the Correlates of American Police Officer Use of Force Decisions," *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 40 (2015): 466–492; Bocar A. Ba et al., "The Role of Officer Race and Gender in Police-Civilian Interactions in Chicago," *Science* 371, no. 6530 (February 2021): 696–702.

⁵ Kelsey Shoub, Katelyn E. Stauffer, and Miyeon Song, "Do Female Officers Police Differently? Evidence from Traffic Stops," *American Journal of Political Science* 65, no. 3 (July 2021): 755–769.

⁶ Tiffany D. Barnes, Emily Beaulieu, and Gregory W. Saxton, "Restoring Trust in the Police: Why Female Officers Reduce Suspicions of Corruption," *Governance* 31, no. 1 (January 2018): 143–161.

⁷ Amie M. Schuck, "Women in Policing and the Response to Rape: Representative Bureaucracy and Organizational Change," *Feminist Criminology* 13, no. 3 (2018): 237–259.

⁸ <https://www.police1.com/women-officers/poll-call-evaluating-barriers-and-support-for-women-in-law-enforcement>

⁹ <https://30x30initiative.org/#:~:text=How%20we're%20changing%20policing,needs%20and%20foster%20their%20success.>

¹⁰ <https://30x30initiative.org/what-works/>

¹¹ <https://www.police1.com/women-in-law-enforcement/30x30-initiative-paving-the-way-for-women-in-policing>

¹² <https://apbweb.com/2024/01/san-diego-p-d-pioneers-nations-first-childcare-center-for-law-enforcement-families/>

¹³ <https://www.insidesandiego.org/san-diego-police-ready-nations-first-childcare-center-open-new-year>

¹⁴ <https://30x30initiative.org/about-30x30/>

¹⁵ <https://porac.org/article/laapoa-2023-womens-leadership-and-empowerment-conference/>