

3Qs: Will first female Secret Service leader mean new culture?

April 5 2013, by Jason Kornwitz



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Earlier this week, President Obama appointed the first woman to lead the U.S. Secret Service in its 148-year history. Julia Pierson, who has more than 30 years of experience in the Secret Service, will be charged with repairing the image of the federal agency, which was rocked by a prostitution scandal in Columbia last year that cost several agents their

jobs. Northeastern University news office asked Amy Farrell, an assistant professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice whose research focuses on measuring the effect of race and gender in police, prosecution, and sentencing practices, to explain why the Obama administration chose Pierson and what it means for women in law enforcement.

White House principal deputy press secretary Joshua Earnest said Pierson's gender was "not the reason she was chosen for the job." How much of a role do you think last year's Secret Service prostitution scandal played in the Obama administration's decision to hire a woman as head of the federal agency?

I am sure it was a consideration. The [Secret Service](#) has a lower proportion of female agents than most federal [law enforcement agencies](#) and was the subject of a recent gender-based scandal. Having said that, the research suggests that promoting a woman to head an agency does not change the culture immediately. Culture is generally well established. If the appointment of a woman is seen as tokenism, she will have difficulty making changes.

However, when you do promote women to leadership positions, you send a symbolic message that there is a pathway to promotion. This helps retain and recruit more women to federal agencies, which, over time, can change the culture. There have been a number of women who have been promoted to positions of authority within the Obama administration. This reflects both the politics of the administration and a growing trend.

Of the Secret Service's 3,500 agents, only about 10 percent are women. Why is female representation in

this field particularly low and how could it be increased?

The percentage of women in the Secret Service is low when compared to all other occupations but not as low with respect to other divisions of [law enforcement](#), such as the Drug Enforcement Administration. The FBI, on the other hand, employs a significantly greater percentage of women—about 20 percent.

There are many possible explanations for the higher proportion of women in the FBI compared to other federal law enforcement agencies. The FBI has actively recruited women, but interestingly one of the biggest changes with regard to the recruitment of women to the FBI took place after the release of the 1991 film "Silence of the Lambs," in which Jodie Foster plays an FBI agent. The movie showed millions of young women that there is a significant role for women in this occupation. Popular culture is important here. We don't see many public images of women in the Secret Service. It is seen as a masculine occupation, and prostitution scandals reify the notion that it is an old boys' network.

There is a two-pronged approach to changing workplace culture, though culture changes slowly. One step is promoting women from within who are very well respected and who hopefully will promote other qualified women. The other is changing how the rules are enforced to ensure that problems like sexual harassment and gender inequality, which make occupations unattractive for female employees, are taken seriously.

There is another point to consider. Being a Secret Service agent is a very patriarchal job with respect to protecting people in positions of power, most of them men. As more and more women are elected into higher office or appointed into leadership roles, the easier it would be seeing them protected by female Secret Service agents.

Women now hold about 44 percent of the positions in both professional and administrative occupations within the federal government, according to a report by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board. How do you think Pierson's promotion to the highest-ranking female agent in the U.S. Secret Service will affect women's chances of landing other high-ranking jobs within the federal government?

I don't think this particular promotion alone will lead to the hiring of more women to top-level positions within the federal government, but it does build on a growing trend of women being appointed to high-profile positions within the administration. Janet Napolitano, for example, the first woman to serve as the U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security, has headed that office for a number of years and is doing an excellent job. As women continue to assume leadership roles and excel, we'll see more [women](#) being hired.

Provided by Northeastern University

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