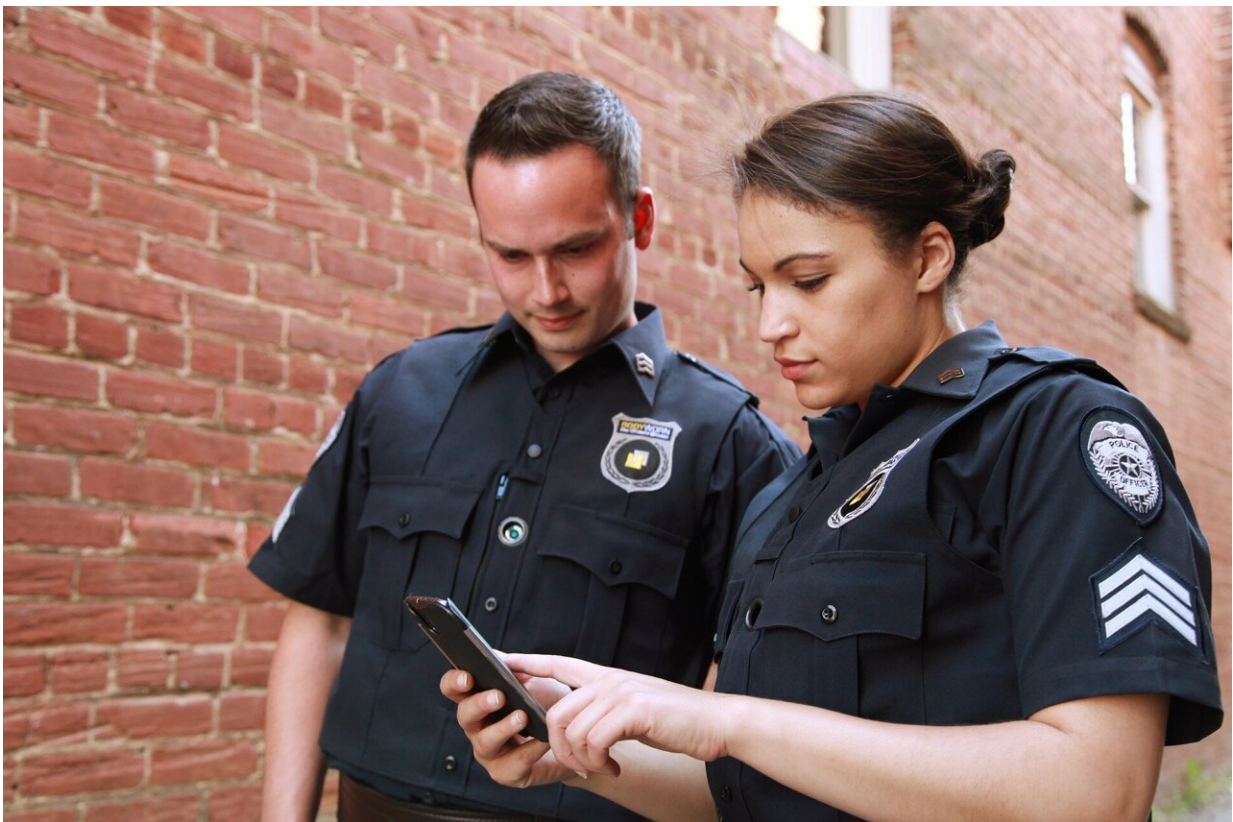


In study of police, female officers perceived more danger, were more suspicious of civilians than male colleagues

July 23 2024



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How do female police officers, who are often excluded from the traditional masculine occupational culture of policing, feel about their

working environment and how the public perceives them? A new study has used survey data from officers in a large, urban police department to test for gender differences in two aspects of the external environment that are core to police cultural attitudes: perceptions of danger and suspiciousness toward civilians.

Relative to their male colleagues, female officers perceived more danger and were more suspicious of civilians, though the differences were modest.

The study, by researchers at the University of Central Florida (UCF), is [published](#) in *Women & Criminal Justice*.

"Police agencies are gendered organizations steeped in traditional male masculinity and women were excluded from policing until 1972; since then, discrimination has continued in more subtle ways," explains Jacinta M. Gau, professor of criminal justice at UCF, who led the study. Eugene A. Paoline, III, professor of [criminal justice](#) at UCF, is the article's co-author.

Past studies have detailed the exclusion of female police officers from an occupational culture that endorses a detached suspicion of the public as a result of the inherent dangers of the street. But few studies have examined directly how female officers perceive or respond to facets of this external (i.e., community) working environment.

In this study, researchers collected survey data from [police officers](#) in an urban municipal department in a city in the southeastern United States between October 2019 and February 2020. The city had 287,000 residents, a median household income of about \$52,000, an 18% poverty rate, and a 72% employment rate. Roughly a third of residents were non-Hispanic white, a quarter were non-Hispanic Black, and a third were Hispanic or Latinx. The city police department employed approximately

800 sworn officers, 552 of whom completed the survey.

In its analysis of officers who reported having street-level assignments, the survey gauged individuals' perceptions of danger on the job and suspiciousness (i.e., how suspicious and distrustful officers felt toward civilians).

Female officers, who made up 17% of officers in the study, perceived greater danger in the community environment and expressed more suspicion towards citizens than did their male peers. The differences between female and male officers were modest, but because women constitute such a [small minority](#) in police agencies nationally, any barrier that affects women uniquely threatens to stall the historically slow progress toward gender equality that has existed at critical stages of a policing career, the authors say.

Moreover, greater levels of perceived danger over time can take a toll on officers' mental health, so female officers may be at particular risk for the emotional side effects of a preoccupation with danger. The study's findings suggest that female officers are coping with the external strains consistent with monolithic depictions of occupational culture. In this sense, even though women may still not be fully accepted within a masculine culture created and sustained by men, they endorse certain traditional cultural orientations even more so than their male colleagues.

The study's findings have practical implications, including that police agencies should improve female officers' actual or perceived safety. Agencies should, for example, investigate whether their female officers feel they are equipped and protected adequately. They should also monitor how welcome female officers feel and adopt zero-tolerance stances on animosity, [sexual harassment](#), or "othering" (e.g., sexist or obscene joking) that could create toxic environments for women, the study's authors say.

Among the study's limitations are that it surveyed just one police agency and its findings are based on self-reports, so they may not generalize to other agencies.

"Despite significant gains toward gender and occupational equality, policing remains a male-dominated occupation in which [women](#) face many barriers," notes Paoline. "By considering the role of gender in [police work](#), we hope agencies see ways to remove these barriers so policing can be an attractive occupation for people of all genders."

More information: Jacinta M. Gau et al, Female Police Officers' Cultural Perceptions of the External Work Environment, *Women & Criminal Justice* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/08974454.2024.2335926](https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2024.2335926)

Provided by Crime and Justice Research Alliance

Citation: In study of police, female officers perceived more danger, were more suspicious of civilians than male colleagues (2024, July 23) retrieved 23 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-07-police-female-officers-danger-suspicious.html>

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