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February 12, 2015

## **An Examination of Eight Factors Influencing Women's Retention in Federal Law Enforcement**

I want to thank Dr. Helen Yu, WIFLE Board Member, for conducting this extensive research and presenting her findings which can only serve to assist agencies in the recruitment, retention and promotion of women in federal law enforcement; the core mission of WIFLE.

WIFLE's latest research survey results will help agencies assess their culture and determine if the policies in place are sufficient to advance the retention and promotion of women law enforcement employees. Women still report experiencing sexual harassment and discrimination; though such instances are down from the 2003 research when 43% of the women reported sexual harassment and discrimination experiences, now 21% report such instances in the latest research.

What remains as the single biggest occupational barrier for sworn women is overcoming the pervasive negative male attitudes and negative work culture in their agencies. Though faced with this issue it is reported that 90% of the women would not leave the agency because of that negativity.

Agencies may still need to review their policies that address the work life balance issue. The women in this survey reported that this is the second barrier in the way of a fully successful career. Many agencies do not have a pregnancy policy.

Read more about what can be do be done in the conclusion section to enhance the contributions of sworn women and bring women to fully participate in their agencies and grow in their law enforcement careers which in turn will bring positive change to your agencies.

Sincerely,

Catherine W. Sanz  
President/Executive Director  
WIFLE Foundation/WIFLE, Inc.  
Attached FC\_WIFLE Summary

# An Examination of Eight Factors Influencing Women's Retention in Federal Law Enforcement

Dr. Helen H. Yu

**TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY-CORPUS CHRISTI**

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# An Examination of Eight Factors Influencing Women's Retention in Federal Law Enforcement

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Dr. Helen H. Yu

## BACKGROUND

Despite the passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972, federal law enforcement continues to be a male-dominated or non-traditional occupation—those that have fewer than 25% women in their labor force. According to the latest figures provided by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (Reaves 2012), women comprise just 15.5% of all sworn federal law enforcement officers, despite the fact that 47% of all working Americans are women (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014). What accounts for this underrepresentation is unclear; however, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (1998) report that women are not making quick exits from the profession but rather after several years of service. This pattern seems to reflect problems not with recruiting and screening but with aspects of the job itself. Unfortunately, very little research exists on gender and federal policing. Most of the research on women in law enforcement targets women police officers in state and local law enforcement. To date, only four studies exist whose target population examine female federal law enforcement officers (Barratt, Thompson and Bergman 2011; Blasdel 2010; Keverline 2003; Schulz 2009). To add to this limited base of knowledge about women in federal law enforcement and to potentially provide an explanation for their underrepresentation, this study examines eight factors (occupational barriers) that may or may not influence women's decision to remain in federal law enforcement. These factors include pervasive negative attitudes from male colleagues, negative law enforcement work culture, perceived glass ceiling to promotions, sexual harassment and sexual discrimination, lack of high-ranking female role models, and lack of pregnancy-friendly and family-friendly policies.

## METHOD

This study drew its sample (n=168) from sworn female federal law enforcement officers attending the 12th Annual Women in Federal Law Enforcement (WIFLE) Leadership Training Conference (June 20-23, 2011). The 56-item survey asked both quantitative and qualitative questions about women's identities and experiences on a variety of issues facing women in federal law enforcement. Not all survey items are covered in this summary. In addition, a sub-sample of 20 attendees was interviewed to collect supplemental data to enrich the findings from the survey data.

## DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

This sample consisted mostly of Caucasian (54.5%) women with a mean age of 39. Over half (64.9%) are married or had been married though less than half (47.6%) have children. Slightly over half (50.1%) are currently single, separated, or divorced. These women are educated with 84.5% having at least a bachelor's degree and 26.8% having a master's or higher (see Tables 1 through 4).

Over half (58.7%) are mid-level officers (GS-13) or higher (see Table 5) and 54.8% have supervisory experience. The sample represents 34 federal law enforcement agencies with all the major agencies present. In addition, these women are experienced federal law enforcement officers having an average of 10.01 years at their current agency and 12.23 years total in federal law enforcement. An overwhelming 91.2% indicate they will remain in federal law enforcement assuming things in their personal life and work remain the same.

Over a quarter (27.5%) of the women report some influence by the events of 9/11 for pursuing or staying in federal law enforcement. For those women born after 1980, the percentage increases to 34.4%. In addition, the overwhelming majority (81.5%) had no prior experience in state or local law enforcement. Of the 18.5% who did have prior experience in municipal policing, the mean response was 4.76 years.

**Table 1 Frequency Distribution of Respondents' Ethnicity**

Response	<i>n</i>	%	n=167
African American	24	14.4	
Asian/Pacific Islanders	10	6.0	
Caucasian	91	54.5	
Latina	32	19.2	
Native American	2	1.2	
Other	1	0.6	
Multiracial	7	4.2	

**Table 2 Frequency Distribution of Respondents' Current Relationship Status**

Response	<i>n</i>	%	n=168
Single	49	29.2	
Married	84	50.0	
Domestic partner	10	6.0	
Separated/Divorced	25	14.9	

Table 3 Frequency Distribution of Respondents' Number of Children

Response	<i>n</i>	%	n=168
0	88	52.4	
1	28	16.7	
2	28	16.7	
3	19	11.3	
4	1	0.6	
5	3	1.8	
6	1	0.6	

Table 4 Frequency Distribution of Respondents' Educational Level

Response	<i>n</i>	%	n=168
High School	1	0.6	
Some college	25	14.9	
Bachelors	97	57.7	
Masters	41	24.4	
Doctoral	4	2.4	

Table 5 Frequency Distribution of Respondents' GS-Level

Response	<i>n</i>	%	n=167
GS-7 or E-6/E-7	6	3.6	
GS-9 or E-8/E-9	15	9.0	
GS-11 or O-2	8	4.8	
GS-12 or O-3	26	15.6	
GS-13 or O-4	69	41.3	
GS-14 or O-5	20	12.0	
GS-15 or O-6	7	4.2	
SES or O-7+	2	1.2	
Non-GSA pay scale	14	8.4	

## FINDINGS: EIGHT FACTORS

Analysis reveals a complex picture of the women in federal law enforcement. Some of the findings are consistent with existing research on female police officers in local and state law enforcement while others are unique to federal policing. The eight factors are separated into two categories: gendered occupational barriers and work-life balance occupational barriers. All women in this study report at least one occupational barrier in the workplace.

### Gendered Occupational Barriers

The women in this study identify lack of respect by male colleagues as the biggest barrier for women in federal law enforcement. Of the respondents surveyed, 24.1% of the women report pervasive negative attitudes from their male colleagues. Similarly, 16.9% of the women in this study experience a negative law enforcement work culture at their agency. Despite these challenges, the women in this study are not intimidated; 90.5% report they would not depart federal law enforcement as a result of this negativity. In addition to male colleagues' resistance, women appear to face a glass ceiling to promotions. Of the respondents surveyed, 19.4% of the women in this study perceive a glass ceiling to promotions with an additional 47.9% unsure of the promotional possibilities at their agency.

Due to the masculine nature of policing, it comes as no surprise that more than 40% of the women in this study identify instances of sexual discrimination or sexual harassment. Despite efforts to curb discrimination, 21.3% of the women in this study experienced sexual discrimination in regard to work assignments, promotions, and training opportunities at their current agency with 43% having experienced sexual discrimination at one time or another throughout their career in federal policing. Keverline (2003) also reports over a third (38.2%) of the women in her study experienced sexual discrimination. Despite the higher figure in this study, only 21.2% of the women made a formal report in comparison with the 48.2% who filed complaints in Keverline's (2003) study, suggesting that women may still fear retaliation or being ostracized by peers and supervisors or reflect a common perception that nothing will be done. Similarly, 18.7% of the women in this study experienced sexual harassment at their current agency with 39.8% of the women having experienced sexual harassment at one time or another during their career in federal law enforcement. This percentage is less than the numbers (48.9%) Keverline (2003) reports in her study. Of those who experienced sexual harassment, only 19.7% made a formal report. This is a stark decrease from 68.2% who reported the incident to their supervisor in Keverline's (2003) study. The much lower response in reporting is troublesome, suggesting alleged victims still fear reprisal or have become so "thick skin" the problem is never addressed.

As for female role models, 59.1% of the women in this study perceive there are not enough high-ranking female role models at their agency and report an

average of only 2.81 female role models at their current agency. In addition, of the 33.5% who have a mentor at their agency, only 40% are female mentors.

### Work-Life Balance Occupational Barriers

Next to lack of respect by male colleagues, the women in this study identify work-life balance as the second biggest barrier for women in federal law enforcement. One third (34%) of the women in this study perceive a lack of family-friendly care policies at their agency, and 31.7% indicate they would leave their agency as a result of inadequate support with family obligations. Keverline (2003) also found work-life balance as a significant barrier in federal law enforcement. Almost half (44.2%) of the women in her study report they would depart their present agency because their agency's policies did not provide adequate support in raising a family; 25.7% would depart for inadequate support in caring for elderly parents. In today's society, women continue to be the primary caregiver, making employment with shift work especially difficult (Rabe-Hemp 2008). Unlike municipal policing, shift work is common in federal law enforcement and for junior officers, frequently work weekends, holidays, and nights (Damp 2008). By law, federal special agents and inspectors receive law enforcement availability pay (LEAP) because of the large amount of overtime that these agents work and the expectation to carry their firearm and exercise their arrest authority whenever necessary (Damp 2008). Likewise, travel and frequent transfers are common practice in federal law enforcement. No other profession, other than the military, requires relocations for career advancement. The women in this study had a mean response of 1.61 (SD = 1.831) permanent relocations ranging between 0 and 10 transfers. Similarly, the women had a mean response of 1.31 (SD = 1.824) business trips lasting longer than 3 months with a range of 0 to 15 trips. Altogether, such occupational requirements impede family obligations.

Likewise, 27.2% of the women in this study perceive a lack of pregnancy-friendly care policies at their agency and 30.7% indicate they would leave their agency because of inadequate support during pregnancy. This number is higher than the rates (21.4%) Keverline (2003) report in her previous study, suggesting pregnancy support is still an important issue with women in federal law enforcement.

### CONCLUSIONS

Several conclusions can be drawn from the results of this study. First, all policewomen identify at least one occupational barrier that may impede their success in federal law enforcement. As long as women in federal policing continue to idle around 15.5%, no amount of organizational 'sensitivity' training will likely change the masculine identity of law enforcement. Federal agencies must create an organizational culture that does not tolerate harassment and discrimination and implement policy actions to minimize the perception of limited female role models, as well as highlight women's

contribution in this male-dominated field. One initiative assigns every new female officer entering an agency with a female mentor to enhance occupational success. Other suggestions include placing more women in special duty assignments to highlight women's contribution within an agency and pro-active efforts to ensure at least one woman receives a training slot for every training opportunity that becomes available. By placing value on women's presence in the workplace, female officers become part of the informal networks that are essential to the police culture.

Second, work-life balance issues continue to impede women's success in federal law enforcement. Police agencies have not kept pace with the private sector in implementing more family-friendly policies such as maternity/paternity leave, flextime to accommodate general family needs, and in-house day care options (Rabe-Hemp 2008). Strategies to retain more women in federal policing must include policies that promote a flexible work environment. One such policy recommendation involves a maternity leave program separate from sick leave or vacation leave. Federal law enforcement agencies should adopt maternity leave programs similar to New York Police Department (NYPD) and the military. Female military members and NYPD officers automatically receive 6 weeks of paid maternity leave separate from sick leave or vacation leave. In addition, male military members receive 10 days of paid paternity leave when their wives give birth. Adopting this initiative in federal law enforcement sends the message that federal agencies support raising a family. Another policy proposal is telecommuting or domicile agents (agents who work from home full- or part-time). Due to variations among federal agencies, the application of this initiative is unrealistic for all agencies but for those with streamlined functions, working from home benefits women (and men) with family obligations. Both proposals support women raising a family early in their careers and help balance work-life issues.

In summary, the results of this research add to the study of women in federal law enforcement and the factors that may or may not influence their decision to stay or depart federal law enforcement. Further, it identifies the biggest barrier and other challenges women face in federal law enforcement and what can be done to retain more women in federal law enforcement. Administrators and decision-makers can use this information to implement policy initiatives to further recruit or retain more women in this field; however, far more research will be required to fully understand women's experience in federal law enforcement and the factors that drive them to depart federal law enforcement.



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