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**Municipal Police Officers:  
Responsibilities, the Hiring Process, the Challenges They Face, and Possible Solutions**

**Isabella Palmeira**

Merrimack College

Master of Science in Criminology & Criminal Justice

August 2021

## **Municipal Police Officers:**

### **Responsibilities, the Hiring Process, the Challenges They Face, and Possible Solutions**

#### **Career Path for Municipal Police Officers**

Municipal police officers work for law enforcement agencies that are under the control of the local government. A police officer works under supervision to perform law enforcement duties, protecting life, property, and the civil rights of individuals. The primary duties include patrol; interacting with citizens to provide service and render assistance; and preparing and completing records, reports, and other paperwork documenting incidents for use in prosecution. A police officer is dispatched to crime and emergency scenes in response to reported violations, accidents, domestic disputes and abuses, and other incidents; carries out crime scene duties; makes arrests and performs searches and seizures; conducts investigations; and interviews witnesses, suspects, and complainants (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2021).

Massachusetts Municipal Police Departments encompass many specialized units that perform various functions throughout the Commonwealth and assist with partner law enforcement agencies in the interest of public safety (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2021) that have emerged through contemporary policing. Although essentially every town or city department has different specialized units, Table 1 below explains all of the typical specialized units that you can choose to work in, and the responsibilities of each one.

The unit that I am interested in pursuing in the future is the Criminal Investigations Section unit. As explained below, this unit is responsible for reviewing reports and making a determination as to the solvability of a crime. The goal of this unit is to provide the highest quality of service to those who have been victimized by crime. Regardless of the severity of the

offense, the unit looks to advocate for all victims and keep them updated on the status of their case. This unit aligns best with my morals, interests, and future prospects. I have always wanted to help others, which this unit undoubtedly does by putting offenders behind bars, thus deterring future crimes, and providing justice and a sense of closure to the victims, as well as their families. This unit also aligns with my future prospects on account that after a few years of police service I plan to work for the federal government, specifically in the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) or Department of Homeland Security (DHS), as a special agent. Both of these agencies typically require at least three years of investigative experience, thus being employed as a municipal police officer is my stepping stone which will increase the skills and confidence needed to someday pursue my aspiration of working for the federal government and correspondingly a prosperous career.

**Table 1. Specialized Units**

<b>Unit</b>	<b>Responsibilities</b>
Traffic	Enforcing the motor vehicle traffic laws and parking violations
Aviation	Responding to in-progress crimes, assisting in the search for missing persons, conducting routine patrol flights
Bomb Squad	Responding to threats related to explosives
K-9	Utilizing dogs to search buildings, detecting drugs or other chemicals
Harbor or marine	Often first responders, mounted on motorcycles, ATVs, bicycles or horses
Cybersecurity	Conducting technical investigations, providing digital forensic support for the search and seizure of digital evidence in all types of crimes
Animal Control	Dealing with scenarios where animals are in

	danger or are endangering civilians
SWAT	Specializing in special weapons, equipment and tactics to handle high threat situations
Gang	Suppressing criminal gang activity, investigating gang-related crimes, gathering criminal intelligence on known or suspected gang members
Sexual Assault	Preventing and deterring all types of sex crimes and domestic violence investigations
Criminal Investigations Section	Reviewing reports and making a determination as to the solvability of a crime
Narcotics	Identifying, investigating, and apprehending individuals and organizations involved in the illicit trafficking of controlled substances
Property & Evidence Unit	Securing all properties that come into the control of the Police Department
Records	Inventorying, archiving all case reports, responding to Criminal Offender Record Information and public record requests
Crime Analysis	Collecting, processing, analyzing, and reporting of crime trends, patterns, problems, and people involved in criminal activity
School Resource	Safety and crime prevention in schools
Community Relations	Implementing the basic goals of community policing to improve community-police relations
Training	Equipping officers with up-to-date training, informing officers on new law enforcement issues, training in emerging technology, responsible for the academy, in-service training, the Cadet Training Program, and the Citizen Police Academy
Youth Aid and Student Support	Processing all juveniles under arrest, investigating juvenile crimes, maintaining reports of runaway and missing juveniles

(Specialized Units, 2021; Springfield Police Department, 2021; Cambridge Police Department, 2021).

There are typically seven different hierarchical rank structures within municipal law enforcement. The ranks (in order from least to most superior) are as follows: Police Officer, Police Detective, Police Sergeant, Police Lieutenant, Police Captain, Police Deputy Chief, and Chief of Police. Like any other occupation, you must work your way up through the ranks, and with each higher rank comes further responsibilities and a growth in salary. Table 2 below explains the different types of ranks, in order, and the average (annual) salary that comes with each rank.

**Table 2. Police Ranks and Average Annual Salary**

Rank	Average Annual Salary
Police Officer	\$60,000
Police Detective	\$61,000
Police Sergeant	\$69,000
Police Lieutenant	\$78,000
Police Captain	\$81,000
Police Deputy Chief	\$110,000
Chief of Police	\$120,000

(RedBlueJobs, 2021; Salary.com, 2021).

Salaries in Massachusetts for policing vary significantly. The salary of a police officer will depend on several factors, including the location of their department (a rural area or large city), the length of time at their department (and if they have seniority or they're fresh out of the

academy), the rank they hold, and the amount of overtime or leave they perform. Also, while it may not (yet) be required, having a post-secondary education under your belt as a police officer will earn you a higher salary and make it easier for you to move up through the ranks.

Additionally, police officers with “more education may also be better able to adapt to proposed community policing initiatives, including public outreach and crime prevention initiatives... New research suggests that possessing a bachelor’s degree may improve certain aspects of field performance, including using less verbal and physical force than officers of the same experience without a degree” (Lexipool, 2016).

Some municipalities offer percentage increases while other municipalities offer a stipend. This depends on the collective bargaining agreement within the city/town. Concerning percentage increases, an officer could be granted a base salary increase of ten percent upon attaining an associate’s degree in law enforcement (or a related field), a twenty percent increase upon attaining a bachelor's degree in law enforcement, and a twenty-five percent increase upon attaining a master’s degree in law enforcement (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2021). On the other hand, some municipalities offer stipends, which are typically fixed monetary amounts, while salaries tend to increase over time.

Stipends, for example, may also be given to an individual who is sponsored by a police department that is interested in having them become a part of their police force. While attending the police academy an individual receives a fixed amount of money in order to help with necessary expenses, such as food or housing (Picincu, 2020). Once the individual successfully graduates from the academy and has passed all of the qualifications, they will officially be hired by the police department and correspondingly start to receive a salary. Lastly, but worth noting, individuals should calculate the value of benefits into the compensation package. Police officers

typically enjoy paid vacation, sick leave, medical and life insurance, and uniform allowances. Plus, on account of pensions, police can sometimes afford to retire at a younger age than most.

### **The Hiring Process**

In order to become a police officer in Massachusetts, there are certain criteria and qualifications which must be obtained. The hiring process generally consists of a basic application or pre-screening questionnaire, a written exam or entrance test which assesses reading comprehension, problem-solving and judgment skills, memory, and writing skills. Additionally, a video exam (to evaluate one's interpersonal skills and judgement based on various scenarios), a physical fitness or ability test (which varies based on age and gender), a background investigation, drug test, psychological test, polygraph, and oral board is required before securing employment. Lastly, a medical exam evaluates height, weight, vision, and hearing, and includes chest x-rays, blood tests, urine tests, blood pressure, and electrocardiograms are required (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2018).

There are certain educational and training requirements an individual must fulfill in order to become a municipal police officer in Massachusetts. A high school diploma or GED is the minimum formal education requirement for most police officers. Although the educational requirements are currently lenient, every police officer you see on the job underwent a rigorous police academy program in their city, state, or department of choice. Likewise, some colleges have been authorized by the Municipal Police Training Committee (MPTC) to operate police academies that are separate from police departments but are considered acceptable forms of training, such as the Merrimack College Police Academy.

In Massachusetts, a police academy generally consists of a comprehensive 800-hour curriculum over a 20-week period which includes both hands-on training and classroom

instruction. Activities and valuable training such as shooting a firearm, intensive physical fitness drills, defensive tactics, emergency and pursuit driving, written examinations (particularly surrounding laws and legal procedures), and mastering meticulous grooming and appearance standards. A police academy embodies a rigorous military style to prepare the trainees for the mental, physical, and emotionally-demanding occupation they are about to encounter.

Due to the harsh realities of policing, it is imperative that one must possess qualities including critical thinking, physical fitness, problem-solving abilities, communication skills, strong moral character, interpersonal skills, mental toughness, and a devotion and allegiance to their community. These skills are necessary to be successful in the field of policing because police never truly know how potentially dangerous an individual or situation they confront, or are dispatched to, could be. Police officers have a lot of discretion, typically being alone or unattended on the job or as a first responder to a life threatening situation. This leaves police with no choice but to make rapid, rational decisions, based on their own experience, training, and judgment. Lastly, the remaining police officer (formal) qualifications require an individual to be a US citizen, over the age of 21, have a valid driver's license, have no felony convictions, nor have been convicted of any class A or B misdemeanors.

### **Challenges Municipal Police Officers Face and Potential Solutions**

#### **Police-Community Relations**

One of the most prominent challenges in current policing is the need to improve their relationship with the community, particularly communities of color. It is imperative that the police and community have a strong relationship with mutual trust, as it is critical to uphold public safety and effective policing (United States Department of Justice, 2017).

The police-community relationship that exists today is a problem much defined along racial lines and a result of various progressive factors which have taken place throughout the early history of policing and government in America. Meese and Malcolm (2017) state that the criminal justice system in America today is structurally racist, meaning it is embedded underneath and all across society, encompassing history, culture, and institutions or policies. To elaborate, according to both Owusu-Bempah (2017) and Barkan (2019), the history of the criminal justice system in America, the police in particular, contribute to the demonization and stereotyping of African Americans as criminals. This started during the slavery era, “when the criminal justice system as we know it today was just beginning. Law enforcement agents called slave patrollers captured escaped slaves and enforced the notorious Southern slave codes, which prevented slaves from becoming literate and sharply regulated all other aspects of their lives” (Barkan, 2019, p. 93; Russell-Brown, 2009). Subsequently, the Black Codes, Jim Crow Laws, and constitutional court cases, including *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857) and *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), sustained racial segregation and bias. Although the Civil Rights Movement took place in America in the 1950s and 1960s, when Black Americans ‘legally’ gained equal rights and privilege under the law, the subhuman status of African Americans (although perhaps implicitly) remained.

Less than two decades after the Civil Rights movement ended, the War on Drugs surfaced. The War on Drugs essentially created strict drug laws that targeted and falsely accused African Americans, led to the substantial increase of African Americans' imprisonment, and helped to construct a negative and dangerous stereotype for African American (males), the “criminalblackman” (Welch, 2007). It is evident that the effects of the war on drugs still linger today. Compared to the racial makeup of the overall U.S. population, African-Americans

continue to make up a disproportionate percentage of the prison population. Though African-Americans comprise only about 12% of the total US population, they represent 33% of the federal and state prison population. That is compared to whites who constitute 64% of American adults but just 30% of those behind bars (Gramlich, 2019). Additionally, research suggests that people of color are racially profiled in a negative way by police, being disproportionately stopped while driving or walking, [and] when they are stopped they are more likely to be searched compared to whites (Barkan, 2019, p. 98- 99). Additionally, “African Americans are three times more likely than whites to be killed by the police” (Barkan, 2019, p. 107). All of these progressive factors have resulted in friction and distrust between police and community.

### **Mass Demonstrations and the Growth of the Black Lives Matter Movement**

The handling of mass demonstrations by the police throughout American history is another factor that has prompted poor police-community relations. Mass demonstrations, or protests, have existed since America's beginning, and are a form of activism that have been utilized to make people's voices heard and advocate for reform (Dudenhoefer, 2020). From the Boston Tea Party in 1773, to the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, to the Selma March in 1965, mass demonstrations have been handled inconsistently and erratically by law enforcement (Cromwell, 2016). Mass demonstrations have always been a considerable challenge to law enforcement agencies, as they must balance a great number of conflicting demands, including “allowing legitimate groups to express their First Amendment rights, protecting innocent bystanders, safeguarding municipal and private property, ensuring unimpeded commerce and traffic, containing unruly protestors with the appropriate type and amount of force, preventing injuries to officers; and, all the while, projecting professionalism and proficiency” (Hess et al., 2013, p. 227). Although mass demonstrations have always been an issue for police for the

reasons stated above, the increased presence of modern media has made it increasingly more difficult for (both citizens and) the police.

Multiple studies have examined the influence of media coverage in relation to mass demonstrations. One research study used the concept ‘inferential framework’ in order to recognize how news media simultaneously came to “anticipate, interpret and then depict the largely peaceful events of the day through a media frame of violence. This ‘definition of the event,’ this expectation of violence, according to one of the authors, ‘served to concentrate attention on the form of actions to the neglect of underlying causes’ and in this way the march was emptied of its radical political content” (Murdock, 1981, p. 210; Cottle, 2008). Another similar research study found that media framing increasingly polarized, marginalized and belittled the protesters and their objectives, and highlighted the violence of demonstrations by both police officers and citizens (Gitlin, 1980; Cottle, 2008).

The challenges of mass demonstrations to police officers has exponentially grown since the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement began. The term Black Lives Matter first appeared as a hashtag in 2013 as a response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the murder of Trayvon Martin, who was a 17-year old unarmed African American. However, a hashtag was not the only response to the acquittal, as massive protests began in Times Square. Tensions among police departments across the country rose heavily after Zimmerman’s acquittal, following accusations of police brutality and racial profiling. Just a year later in 2014, the killing of an unarmed 18-year African American named Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri occurred, and sparked nationwide outrage, protests, and swiftly increased the attention of the BLM movement.

Later that year, a counter movement founded by police officers called ‘Blue Lives Matter’ emerged to support police officers in response to the killings of two police officers on

the line of duty by an African American with a grievance against the police. Over the next several years, a multitude of high-profile police killings by white police officers of unarmed African Americans, including Walter Scott, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Daniel Prude, Terence Crutcher, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and others, increased the support and awareness of the ideas behind of the movement BLM (Treisman, 2021). This left the nation with unresolved civil unrest, and further put forth the view that law enforcement is systemically racist (Treisman, 2021). Another prominent issue that has aided the BLM matter movement and worsened police-community relations is the lack of accountability that police officers received for these (unarmed) killings of African Americans. To elaborate, the majority of these officers in these cases stated above were acquitted or did not receive federal criminal or civil charges, fueling the fire and promoting a lack of procedural justice and accountability for police misconduct or brutality. An investigation concluded that police have shot and killed approximately 135 unarmed African Americans since 2015, and some officers were involved in more than one shooting (Thompson, 2021; NPR, 2021). Although technically generated to support and defend the role of police officers and their families, critics believe the creation of the counter movement, Blue Lives Matter, worsened police-community relations. Blue Lives Matter is seen as a symbol that is polarizing, and fails to recognize the community's role in public safety, the importance of community-police relations, and shifts the focus to the police as victims (Cooper, 2020).

Although the support and awareness of the BLM movement was rising for nearly a decade, the landmark incident that changed everything was the high profile killing of 46-year-old African American man George Floyd. The disturbing footage of Floyd's death was released and broadcasted around the globe on an abundance of news channels and all platforms of social

media. The footage came from white police officer Derek Chauvin's body camera, and showed Chauvin pressing his knee on Floyd's neck for 8:46 seconds, after Floyd repeatedly gasped that he could not breathe. As a result, the name George Floyd, the number 8:46, and the phrase "I can't breathe" have all become dominant symbols of police brutality (Ingoglia & Henderson-Smith, 2021). This incident occurred over suspicion that Floyd used a counterfeit \$20 bill to buy a pack of cigarettes (Reny & Newman, 2020). Shortly after the high profile death of George Floyd, the slogan "defund the police" began and protesters turned even more anti-police and violent. Within days of this event, millions of protesters across the nation and over 60 countries rallied against police brutality (Reny & Newman, 2020).

Research explains that in the months following Floyd's death, tens of thousands of protests erupted and the resignation of some police officers in midwestern cities quintupled on account that officers became concerned about the fierceness of the Floyd protests as some people began to openly assault officers, attempt to blow up police vehicles, and set fire to police precincts (Lehmann, 2021). According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, following the death of Floyd, nearly 100 confederate monuments were taken down, moved from public spaces, or destroyed by BLM activists due to the enlargement of people holding they symbolized systematic racism, police brutality, and white supremacy (Lehmann, 2021).

The way that police departments responded to the majority of BLM protests was criticized and worsened community relations, especially as they were broadcasted on all networks and platforms. Critics exclaim that this is not a new matter, as police brutality has always existed, but the growth and popularity of technology has permitted these offenses to become easily documented. An after-action assessment sponsored by the Justice Department's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) concluded that police relied on

ineffective and inappropriate strategies and tactics that had the “unintended consequence of escalating rather than diminishing tensions” (Maguire, 2015, p. 67). To elaborate, critics explained that some police departments responded to the protests in a way that was overly militaristic, using a lack of de-escalation tactics, excessive force, and essentially exhibiting police brutality on account police officers stood fully armed against some peaceful protests while employing tear gas, pepper spray, rubber bullets, and carrying out mass arrests on unarmed citizens and protesters which inevitably worsened police community relations (Maguire, 2015).

City police departments throughout the nation have reported a substantial depreciation in manpower after Floyd’s death, as high numbers of police officers retire or resign. According to Lehmann (2021), the NYPD’s headcount plummeted to its lowest level in decades, Chicago police retirements increased by around 15 percent, more than 115 officers, as well as a whole unit dedicated to crowd control, withdrew from Portland PD, and almost 200 officers have left, or are on leave, in the Minneapolis PD. The findings of a recent additional study concluded that the hiring of police departments overall decreased by an average of five percent in 2020, resignations rose by nearly twenty percent, and retirements by 45 percent. To explain these declining rates, a study showed that the majority of police officers who retired or resigned were motivated by the increase in protests and mass demonstrations, and consequently the large decrease of support from society or civilian officials (Lehman, 2021).

Research has shown that the concept of media framing severely results in differential viewpoints regarding the BLM movements and protests. To elaborate, articles and networks which presented a “legitimizing debate frame increased support for protesters, identification with protesters, and police criticism compared to articles with riot and confrontation frames. Riot and confrontation frames increase criticism toward protesters, decreased support for and

identification with the movement, and decrease police criticism” (Kilgo & Mourao, 2021, p. 576). Particularly following Floyd’s death, police activity in mass demonstrations were increasingly scrutinized by third parties such as news organizations, amateur reporters, and civil rights organizations, all of whom are supplied with video cameras and focus on the most newsworthy story in order to increase their views and revenue (Narr et al., 2006).

### **Gender Inequality in Policing**

The second principal issue discussed is gender inequality in policing. Gender inequality for females in the police service is robust and prominent in various ways, including slower progressions through the ranks, unequal income (gender pay gap), under-representation, lack of leadership roles, resistance and discrimination from male counterparts, and sexual harassment in the workplace. However, many of these barriers and inequalities to women in policing are not specific to solely policing, but are a reflection of greater societal issues (National Institute of Justice, 2019).

The issue of gender inequality in policing is not surprising when looking at the overall history of women in policing and women in America. Historically, the role of females in policing was primarily to assist male officers and handle police work aimed toward women and children, including child abuse, juvenile, and prostitute cases (Davis, 2005; Prenzler, 1996). For over a century (after policing in America began in the 1830s), women in policing did not execute functions that were regarded to be masculine in nature. It was not until 1968 that two women were designated to the all-male fortification of patrol (Ahmad, 2001). Much like policing, throughout the course of history various occupations have been classified as suitable for one sex or the other, constructed from gender roles and sex stereotyping. Once a specific job is sex-typed, it is difficult to break the segregation (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Prior to 1970, roughly

40 percent of females were employed in ten occupations that society designated “appropriate” for women (Davis, 2005). Despite notable changes in American society that have taken place and continue to (gradually) occur, gender-related norms sustain their dominance, especially in policing. Although policing has been around for centuries, it continues to be heavily influenced by gender, still being ranked among the highest for society's perception of gender related occupations (Davis, 2005).

Sexual harassment and discrimination is another issue prevalent in policing. The concept of sexual harassment in policing is not surprising as sexual harassment is especially prevalent in heavily male dominated occupational settings, alike policing. Somvadee and Morash (2008) highlighted a multitude of studies conducted in the United States and other countries, including Australia and Great Britain, which concluded that more than 50 percent of policewomen had faced sexual harassment. Other studies have also found high rates of sexual harassment, including a study conducted by Brown and Heidensohn (2000) which showed that of 804 female officers surveyed from 35 countries in Europe and American continents, 77 percent, or over three out of four women, reported facing sexual harassment by their male coworkers. This study also found that these women felt dealing with this harassment was a more substantial issue than dealing with dangerous encounters while on patrol, thus making it clear that sexual harassment is a grave issue that causes police women serious distress. Further studies have also suggested similar results, finding that women perceive sexual harassment (as well as discrimination), specifically sexually offensive behaviors, vulgar/offensive language, underestimation of physical abilities, as well as feeling less influential than their men colleagues, to be the most distressing gender related issues in policing (Angehrn et al., 2021). There are numerous reasons why sexual harassment in policing is highly concerning. Aside from the fact that sexual harassment is legally

and morally wrong, this concern is exacerbated, “since officers all rely on each other socially, need each other for emotional support, and deal with life and death situations where they must trust and depend on each other” (Morash & Haar, 1995; Somvadee & Morash, 2008).

Some research studies have shown that the most substantial barrier for women in policing is a male’s attitude and perception of women (Marshall, 2013). Policing has generally been viewed as a man's occupation, (Garcia, 2003; Schulze, 2011) often represented and associated with an “all-boys club” generally unfriendly and averse to feminine inclusion and principles (Cordner, 2011). While the demographics of policing are changing, with recruitment of more women and minorities as officers, the “traditional white male, hypermasculine policing culture that has dominated police departments since the 1950s, persists (Sklansky 2006). Police culture symbolizes attributes such as masculinity, loyalty above all else, authoritarianism, and courage. The changes reported are often incremental, surface changes meant to appease human rights legislation and quiet dissension from the public” (Bikos, 2016, p. 4), such as the Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex and national origin. Although these changes in policy gave the impression that it was a positive progression for women in the labor force, it essentially only provided paper equality in law enforcement, as 50 years has gone by and police culture is still largely unchanged (Cordner, 2011).

Even though women have now been on patrol for several decades, research still shows that many male police officers hold negative perceptions toward female police officers, including that they are physically incapable, insufficiently aggressive, too emotional, mentally fragile, naive, and incapable of gaining sufficient respect of citizens (Angehrn et al., 2021; Balkin, 1988; Bell, 1982; Charles, 1982; Martin, 1980; Martin, 1990; Martin & Jurik, 1996; Palombo, 1992).

Contrarily, further research suggests that male officers feel threatened by female officers and feel reduced in status on account of the fact that women are able to do the same job which has been dominated by males for years because it “demystifies the masculine persona associated with policing and indeed, with the primary male role of protector” (Davis, 2005, p. 3).

Another gender inequality in policing is the fact that women are more prone to suffer from mental illness. Angehrn and colleagues (2021) report that women officers appear to be around 1.66 times more likely than male officers to screen positive for a mental illness, and when they do, women report elevated symptoms of mental illness in comparison to men. Furthermore, nearly half of female police officers report discrimination and prejudice based on their gender (43 percent vs. 3 percent male uniformed officers, and 50 percent vs. 2 percent male officers). Over 40 percent of female police officers report believing that their gender in the context of policing directly contributes to their risk of negative health outcomes” (Angehrn et al., 2021, p. 2).

The under-representation of women in policing is immense and alarming. According to the National Institute of Justice (2019), women make up less than 13% of total officers, and an even smaller percentage of leadership positions. This percentage is extremely disproportionate when compared to the nationwide ratio of females versus males, which is about 50/50. Although the percentage of women in policing quickly skyrocketed from 3 percent in the 1970s to 14 percent in the late 1990s, the rate has since substantially slowed, and even declined for some years, falling to 12 percent in 2001. Moreover, the percentage of women in policing has only increased around 1 percent over the last couple of decades, and at this current rate, women will not attain equality for several generations, if at all (National Center for Women & Policing, 2004; Davis, 2005).

The portrayal and lack of women in the media has also played a role in the gender inequality of policing. Wilson and Blackburn (2014) surveyed the frequency and quality of female municipal police officers represented in 112 films between 1971 and 2011 and found that only 15 of these films depicted female municipal police officers in either a leading or joint leading roles. These films also devalued and fabricated the key barriers regularly endured by female officers in the workplace, including sexual and gender harassment. Instead, the majority of these films exhibited female officers engaging in intimate relationships with senior male police officers and (falsely) indicated the reason for which women became officers was due to traumatic experiences, and hence they were emotionally and mentally scarred or damaged. This wrongful depiction creates negative and falsified stereotypes toward female municipal police officers, while at the same time decreases their overall value and legitimacy, while enforcing the notion of gender inequality in policing.

The last factor related to gender inequality in policing is the gender pay gap. Throughout the history of policing there has been a continued occupational income disadvantage for women. Lou and colleagues (2019) explained that the statistical analyses reveal female police earn on average about 16 percent less than male police officers and that the gender gap has remained relatively stable for since 1990 (from 84 cents on the dollar) from 2018 (86 cents on the dollar). This income gap is unsurprising considering that on average a woman's annual earnings in 2020 were 82.3 percent of men's. Although this percentage may seem low, the gender occupational income disadvantage has decreased substantially over the last 50 years, where on average women only made 57 cents per every dollar earned by men in 1973 (The Bureau of Labor, 2021).

### **Policing and Mental Health**

Mental health among police officers has become a grave concern, as rates of suicide, depression, PTSD, and alcohol abuse remain high, while the stigma associated with police officers seeking mental health services persists. Every year more police officers die by suicide than in the line of duty, and the rate has been increasing since the 1920s (Miller, 2005). Police officers are “54% more likely to die of suicide than all decedents with a usual occupation” (Violanti & Steege, 2021, p. 21). According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (2021), nearly 1 in 4 police officers have contemplated committing suicide at one point in their life. The suicide rate for police officers is even around four times higher than firefighters, an occupation which is also highly stressful itself (Violanti, 2010).

Suicide was the tenth leading cause of death in America in 2020, killing over 48,000 Americans. The easy access and availability of firearms is a concerning and an elevated risk factor in policing. Firearms accounted for a little more than half (50.54%) of all suicide deaths (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2020). Around 90 percent of suicide attempts using a firearm are estimated to be successful. These numbers are significantly alarming when compared to the attempted suicide success rate by all other means combined, which is only around 10 percent (Police Executive Research Forum, 2019).

Trauma exposure is a key component that deteriorates the mental health and well-being of police officers, increasing the risk of suicidal ideation. Examples of trauma exposure that police may encounter throughout their career include witnessing death, violent gang shootings, severe child abuse, or experiencing a close personal encounter with death (Violanti, 2007). Hartley and colleagues (2013) found that police officers experienced various traumatic events at extremely high levels, with 60.1% of men and 46.4% of women officers observed having been

involved in five or more different incidents in the past year. Furthermore, over three-quarters of officers reported a traumatic event occurring in the last thirty days. Police officers that experienced a traumatic event reported a “higher percentage of suicidal thoughts (27.2%) when compared to those who did not report experiencing a traumatic event (7.7%) (Cerel et al., 2019, p. 1282).

The role of suicide exposure on its own is also traumatic. Law enforcement officers generally respond to suicides on duty an average of 30 times over the course of their careers, however, are given little to no training responding to suicide and the effects of its exposure (Cerel et al., 2019). The high likelihood of trauma exposure furthermore puts police officers at an elevated risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While PTSD affects roughly 3.5% of Americans every year, it affects approximately 15% of officers, making police officers around four times more susceptible. Moreover, PTSD on its own leads to additional mental illnesses, such as anxiety and depression. Lastly, PTSD bears numerous side effects that negatively affect police performance and accordingly public safety, including trouble concentrating, sleeping difficulties, irritability, and memory loss (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 2021).

Research indicates that police suffer from higher rates of alcohol abuse than the general population. This concept is not surprising considering the correspondingly high rates of mental illness (particularly PTSD and depression) in policing, as well as the notion that alcohol use (and abuse) have been widely acknowledged as a “maladaptive coping technique (i.e., avoidance technique) used by officers to deal with the many stresses they face. In addition, the (hyper-masculine) police subculture is one that reinforces and encourages the use of alcohol as a legitimate and accepted form of coping with psychosocial pressures associated with the job”

(Obst et al., 2001, p. 352). Promotion of this kind of subculture is problematic considering alcohol abuse increases the risk of (or worsens) mental illness, particularly depression (which is already high in policing) since it affects the chemistry of the brain. Alcohol also makes antidepressant medications less effective, worsens outcomes from depression treatment (Wasson, 2016) and increases the length and severity of depressive episodes (The Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2019). Research shows alcohol and depression are positively correlated, and at least 30 to 50 percent of individuals who suffer from alcohol abuse also suffer from depression. Abusing alcohol also elevates the risk of committing suicide. Alcohol and drug abuse are second only to depression as the most common risk factor to suicide. About three quarters of individuals who commit suicide had taken one or more drugs, and many had taken both drugs and alcohol (Wasson, 2016).

One study by Obst and colleagues (2001) examined the effects of entering the police service (the academy) in relation to drinking by using a longitudinal methodology. The results suggested that entering the police service was correlated with an increase in harmful drinking behaviors. While only six percent of recruits exhibited a risk of alcohol dependency when evaluated on the first day of the academy, 13 percent exhibited a risk of alcohol dependency after six months, and 16 percent after twelve months. The results of this study put forth evidence that the induction and enculturation into the police service negatively influences one's drinking, increasing the likelihood of risky behavior and accordingly, leading to alcohol abuse and possibly a vast degree of other mental disorders.

Alcohol abuse in policing can have a multitude of detrimental repercussions on the general well-being of the public, themselves, and their job performance. Policing is a profession with a high degree of public leadership, accountability and responsibility. Police are more

frequently involved in dangerous situations that could gravely affect themselves or others, and therefore, require rapid thinking and reflexes. Since drinking excessively (or even the effects of a hangover) tends to hamper reaction time, vision, memory and coordination, the efficiency and effectiveness of police performance is negatively affected, and may potentially result in the incapability of apprehending a (violent) offender, hence putting themselves or the public in harm's way (Wasson, 2016).

Trauma exposure, suicidal ideation, alcohol abuse, or existing mental disorders are not the only factors that have been linked to poor mental health among police, as various studies have also found that organizational factors contribute. To elaborate, organizational issues in policing, particularly a heavy workload, poor management, inconsistent leadership styles, excessive administrative duties, time pressure, staff shortages, and shift work have been proven to worsen mental health (Brown & Campbell, 1990; Biggam et al., 1997; Kop et al., 1999; Santa Maria et al., 2018). The stigma that persists around seeking mental health services in policing likely contributes to these high rates. According to Soomro (2019), the prevalence rate of police officers that hold a stigma against seeking mental health services is 13%, while the general American public has a prevalence of roughly 4%. Additionally, roughly nine out of ten police officers recognize stigma as negatively impacting help-seeking behavior; however, even when police officers do receive help or seek help and regard it effective, the rate of stigma persists at high levels.

The police subculture discussed earlier in the text contributes to this stigma. To elaborate, a combination of hypermasculine viewpoints including solidarity, heroism, toughness, leadership, authoritarianism, and bravery are some of the reasons that this stigma exists (Soomro, 2019). Furthermore, before becoming a police officer an individual is required to successfully

pass a psychological health examination, and if a police officer seeks mental health treatments while employed, they may believe others assume they are too mentally or psychologically unfit to handle the job, possibly resulting in termination or affecting future career advancement.

### **Potential Solutions for Police-Community Relations**

Potential solutions to improving community-police relations is to ensure that the public immediately obtains accurate and factual information regarding police violence and use of force. Over the past decade the media has highly publicized numerous ‘excessive use of force incidents; however, this is not the reality of policing. The odds of being killed by police are about 1 in 2,000 for men and about 1 in 33,000 for women (Edwards, 2019). However, you would assume that shootings of unarmed black men happen several times a day due to the continuous and never ending coverage by the news media. The false media narrative must be immediately and effectively countered by all levels of leadership in order to control public perception of highly inflammatory shootings and events (Starbird, 2017).

To maintain and increase public confidence, as well as to manage the reputation of the law enforcement agencies involved, agencies must develop and execute an integrated media strategy that will help achieve overall policing objectives. This integrated strategy should cover aspects including same-day press conferences and utilize highly trained and reputable leadership and spokespersons, which include people of color, who can credibly transmit and control the message to the public (Narr et al., 2006). Also, full transparency with the public must be achieved through release of body camera footage whenever possible to mitigate use of inflammatory video which may not accurately depict events and initially shown (Narr et al., 2006).

The challenge of policing mass demonstrations highlights a number of issues for today's police force. However, these highly volatile gatherings could be more effectively handled by better education, management of police resources, and rapid integration of state and federal resources to reinforce local police as needed (Maguire, 2015). Police leaders must learn to work hand-in-hand with business and community members, especially communities of color, in order to control the message and protect the rights and property of all citizens such that looting, arson, assaults and lawlessness do not go unchecked. Despite recent calls to 'defund the police,' police departments must ensure officers are provided adequate training in procedures and (de-escalation) tactics to safely counter lawful protests and are always provided with non-lethal alternatives (Hess et al., 2013). Police body cameras should be fully integrated into departments, as well to counter false media narratives, but also to ensure officers are held accountable to the public. Further, officer recruitment and retention is absolutely essential to ensure that people of color are strongly represented and years or even decades of experience, training and human investments, in both male and female officers, is not lost. Only through a holistic approach, fully integrated with all levels of police, government and community leadership (or community-oriented policing) brings confidence and pride in policing and gets the public trust restored.

### **Potential Solutions for Gender Inequality in Policing**

One potential solution to gender inequality in policing is educating individuals that aspire to become officers on the negative consequences of gender inequalities, including the gender pay gap, higher rates of mental health issues, male's attitude and negative perception of women due to the hyper-masculine police subculture, and highlighting the areas of policing that women shine. A variety of research has suggested that female officers and "same-gender female-female officer pairs used less force, and were less likely to use physical force, in police-citizen

encounters when compared to their male counterparts” (Schuck & Hemp, 2005), helping improve police-community relations and bring about new policing styles that have the tendency to avoid escalation of violence.

Female officers can excel in many areas within law enforcement, as they provide different methods of handling conflict. Although females are not at a biological advantage when it comes to the brute strength of males, their creativity, interpersonal skills, and conflict resolution aptitude (Schuck & Hemp, 2005) makes them profitable for policing. Male officers must trust the acknowledged beneficial skills of female officers and seek to ensure equal treatment for both males and females throughout their department and policing as a whole. However, due to sustained gender discrimination that has occurred since the dawn of policing, it is unavoidable that some male officers will preserve this negative perception. Solutions to alleviate this mindset include requiring additional training, specifically advanced physical combative and restraint training (such as martial arts), for females to prepare them for the academy and fortify them for physically challenging affairs while on duty.

Another potential solution to gender inequality in policing includes conducting further research that centers on how to increase, recruit, and retain a higher percentage of female officers. A stronger comprehension of the challenges facing women is necessary to develop effective “practices, policies [particularly relating to discriminatory practices and sexual harassment], and organizational climates that support successful career trajectories [and leadership roles] for women in law enforcement. Police executives need more information on best practices as they relate to the training, supervision, and mentoring of female officers. Only through the systematic collection and evaluation of information will we gain a better understanding of the causes and consequences of female representation in law enforcement”

(Schuck & Hemp, 2005). Equal treatment and representation of female officers is needed to break down the barriers for females in law enforcement in order to allow women to demonstrate their high potential and creativity, and begin to finally alter the hyper-masculine culture and stereotypes that have persisted far too long.

### **Potential Solutions for Policing and Mental Health**

The biggest issue that puts police officers at an elevated risk for mental illness is the stigma associated with seeking mental health services. Numerous articles have been published on this issue to determine the reasons why this stigma exists and how to break this harmful perception. One study conducted by Santa Maria and colleagues (2021) found that police leadership influences the degree of which officers reinforce this stigma. It is important to have a police leader that openly talks about mental health, expressing that they genuinely care about the mental health of their subordinate officers and advise seeking mental health is not shameful. When a police leader promotes the importance of mental health, it increases the likelihood that his or her subordinate officers take positive steps to improve their mental health, since they feel more comfortable in an environment which has a (mental) health-oriented attitude. They are also less likely to feel that they will be labelled unfit for the job or will receive disciplinary action for seeking mental health services when compared to the traditional masculine police subculture.

When a police leader expresses that he or she cares for the health of their subordinate officers and signals that it is not shameful to feel stressed and emotionally strained at times, it is more likely that they will seek social support and take positive action to manage their stress. Thus, a health-oriented attitude that is characterized by valuing the health of subordinate officers should be promoted as well during police leadership development in order to prevent that officers postpone help seeking until job-related problems may force disciplinary action and

mental health problems become chronic. A police leader is highly influential and significant to their subordinate officers since the concept of rank and structure in a police department is pivotal.

The job of a chief of police is highly important, as he or she assumes full management responsibility for every officer in their department, administering policies, procedures, training, and more. Statistics show that 90% of those who died by suicide had a diagnosable mental health condition at the time of their death (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2020). These suicides could have been prevented if they obtained mental health services or counseling. There are numerous programs which have been developed due to the increase in awareness of the high rates of mental health issues and suicide in policing, including Blue H.E.L.P., the National Consortium on Preventing Law Enforcement Suicide and the National Suicide Awareness for Law Enforcement Officers Program (SAFLEO). Programs similar to these which should be offered to law enforcement officers for free with easy access to encourage attendance (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2020).

Education and training on mental health should be required for every officer in the department that clearly identifies the warning signs, emotions, and behaviors that are indications of mental health issues or suicidal ideation. Once an officer is educated and aware of these concepts, it may help them recognize some of these signs in one of their fellow officers. This might just prevent them from attempting suicide or encourage them to seek mental health services before these issues become more chronic over time. Moreover, mental health practices and coping mechanisms should be taught, as well as the critical notion that alcohol is not a healthy coping mechanism, but rather a risk factor for worsened or additional mental health issues, such as depression. Lastly, a police leader must be educated on the organizational factors

in policing that have been proven to worsen mental health, including a heavy workload, poor management, inconsistent leadership styles, excessive administrative duties, time pressure, staff shortages, and shift work (Santa Maria et al., 2018). The chief of police must ensure that these organizational issues are not present in the department to ensure good mental health and obtain the highest level of performance, reinforce the department's mission statement and meet the community's expectations for professional policing (McLean, 2015).

### **Discussion**

Police-community relations, gender inequality, and high rates of mental health issues are three prominent challenges that police officers face in the 21st century. It is imperative that the relationship with the community, particularly communities of color, is strong with mutual trust as it brings about cooperation, and critical to uphold public safety. Police-community relations can be improved by ensuring that the public obtains accurate and factual information regarding police violence and use of force incidents. Media strategies must be developed and executed in order to stop the false narrative of policing given. Similarly, full transparency with the public must be achieved through the release of body cameras, and also to ensure officers are held accountable.

Gender inequality for female officers is a complex issue, as it is a reflection of greater societal issues. Inequalities including slower progressions through the ranks, unequal income, under-representation, lack of leadership roles, resistance and discrimination from male counterparts, and sexual harassment in the workplace all persist in policing. Solutions to ensure equal treatment for all officers include educating individuals that aspire to become officers on these gender inequalities, the negative consequences they bring about, the beneficial skills that female officers can bring to a police force (i.e. interpersonal skills, conflict resolution aptitude,

de-escalation tactics), and conducting further research on how to increase, recruit, and retain a higher percentage of female officers.

The high rates of mental health among police officers is a serious concern, as rates of suicide, depression, PTSD, and alcohol abuse remain higher than the general population and more police officers continue to die annually by suicide than on the line of duty (Miller, 2005). Solutions including eliminating the stigma associated with police officers seeking mental health services, required education and training on mental health to identify risk factors and warning signs, and appointing police chiefs with (mental) health-oriented attitudes all have the potential to improve mental health rates in police officers.

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