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# Police Academy Training: An Evaluation of the Strengths and Weaknesses of Police Academies

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of the historical and current protocols which have existed in police academies, with a focus on the gender issues being faced by female police officers. The development of the police force is examined, with explanation of the differences and developments aligning with each era of history. Next, current police practices are elaborated upon, emphasizing the difficulties women experience in becoming police officers and where the ideologies of the police academies originated. Finally, suggestions are given based on research findings in order to reduce the ideological divides that occur in the police force and increase the effectiveness of officers' work in the community.

## **Keywords**

policing, police academies, evaluation research

Police Academy Training: An Evaluation of the  
Strengths and Weaknesses of Police Academies

*Olga Bykov*

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The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of the historical and current protocols that have existed in police academies, with a focus on the gender issues being faced by female police officers. The development of the police force is examined, with explanation of the differences and developments aligning with each era of history. Next, current police practices are elaborated upon, emphasizing the difficulties women experience in becoming police officers, and where the ideologies of the police academies originated. Finally, suggestions are given based on research findings in order to reduce the ideological divides that occur in the police force and increase the effectiveness of officers' work in the community.

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### **Introduction**

Despite recent dilemmas about the state of the national debt, between 1997 and 2007 over eight billion dollars of taxpayer money was spent to improve the quality of policing (Helms & Gutierrez, 2007). With funds this large being distributed, there is a surprisingly low level of public scrutiny in terms of police training. A multitude of complaints and negative attitudes exist toward police work in the field, questioning various forms of discrimination, use of excessive force, and supremacist ideologies, among other issues (Huisman, Martinez, & Wilson, 2005). However, examining the outcomes of police training is fruitless without examining the practices and lessons taking place in police academies. Sedevic (2012) revealed that graduates from the Oakland Police Academy claimed they were not adequately prepared for approximately 34% of job tasks they later had to perform. Statistics like this are worrisome at best. Inadequate preparation of police cadets sets new officers up to inevitably make mistakes, especially concerning gender stratification and discrimination. In order to improve the relationship between police departments and the public, it is necessary to properly prepare officers for issues they are going to face. There is a direct relationship between the training cadets receive in police academies and the behavior they exude to the public. Hyper-masculine, gender constricting attitudes present in police academies reflect themselves directly in police treatment of females within the policing profession and in the community, giving rise to the need for evaluation of police academies and ideological changes in the organization that will promote gender equality.

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### **History**

Although various informal methods of policing were enacted from the founding of the United States, formal police training was created in 1908 by August Vollmer in Berkeley (Scott, 2010). Various other cities followed Berkeley's trend and began creating their own policies and requirements for police officer training. J. Edgar Hoover continued the trend of police professionalization in 1935 when he created the FBI National Academy to employ additional training for local law enforcement officers (Lane, 2005). Both programs emphasized the importance of officer education and knowledge on a variety of issues; previous eras focusing on monetary incentives and political corruption seemed to have finally become obsolete. Progressive reformers supporting a migration toward the professional model of policing aimed to raise personnel standards, define policing as a profession, develop specialized units, eliminate political corruption, appoint qualified chief executives, and introduce principles of scientific management (Helms & Gutierrez, 2007). Since the federal government delegated law enforcement as a responsibility of local municipalities and states, set criteria for police officers were never decided on (Chappell & Gibson, 2009). Thus, the disorganized and decentralized structure of policing was established.

Despite a lack of uniformity in training, many police departments throughout the 1950s and 1960s began adding additional programs as part of the cadet school process. For example, the School Resource Officer (SRO) program was created to allow new police officers to feel comfortable in the communities they were serving, as well as to help students and teachers feel safer at school (Weiler & Cray, 2011). Today, 35%

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of schools at various levels across America use SROs (Weiler & Cray, 2011). Despite sparse efforts throughout the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, problems continued to plague police interactions with the public throughout the civil rights movement and the decades that followed. The main problem that gained recognition was the void between the curricular training cadets received in academies and practical experiences that arose in everyday police work (Caro, 2011). Police officers needed to be prepared for more practical police experiences instead of only understanding the idea of policing.

In order to increase the requirements of police academies, adjustments have been made to law enforcement training facilities within the past 30 years. Most important was the employment of the San Jose Model of Field Officer Training, which allowed cadets to apply the theoretical knowledge they had gained in real-life scenarios (Caro, 2011). This program was crucial in training officers in the discretion and decision-making skills they would face every day. Police training, or lack thereof, finally came under the scrutiny of the United States Supreme Court in *Canton v. Harris* (1989). The Court held that police departments may be held liable when a failure to adequately train officers leads to a deliberate indifference to the constitutional rights of those that the police come into contact with (Marion, 1998). Events of the early 1990s, such as the Rodney King beating and the O.J. Simpson investigation, finally brought the police under public and professional scrutiny, which concluded that police training may not fully address the needs of the profession (Marion, 1998). Tension during police interactions with the community stemmed from different expectations and attitudes of each group; police interpersonal skills were underwhelming and resulted in distrust and disapproval of the

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police (McDermott & Hulse, 2012). These emerging public realizations of imperfections in policing revealed the problems existent in the organization.

Regardless of the long-term effort to move away from the paramilitary centralized hierarchy upon which police organizations were founded, an “us versus them” mentality is still overwhelmingly present in the police academy (Helms & Gutierrez, 2007). For almost a century, events such as the Wickersham Commission in the 1920s, the passage of the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968, and various decisions by the Supreme Court during the due process era pushed police training toward higher ideals, and put more emphasis on public interaction (Mijares & Perkins, 2003). Despite widespread public support of a new model of community policing, it has faced a lack of support in police academies, which prefer to continue operating as a bureaucratic and militaristic organization (Chappel & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010). The 9/11 terrorist attacks transitioned the focus of police organizations to homeland security and terrorism prevention, focusing less on civil and constitutional rights (Chappell & Gibson, 2009). The militarization of the state began to lead police academies away from focusing on topics such as ethics, discretion, and tolerance of diversity. The history of police academies and training seemed to be shifting toward a more demanding curriculum and higher expectations for graduation. Recent developments in homeland security, however, may be causing academies to leave certain principles underdeveloped.

### **Current Police Academy Practices**

There are multiple ways in which a potential police cadet can enter the academy. Candidates are typically interviewed at

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various police departments, then sent off to the training academy if they are accepted. In these cases, the recruits attend the academy for free and receive a salary while training (Marion, 1998). In other cases, those who have not been hired can pay their way through the academy for approximately \$5,000 in hopes of getting hired in the future (McDermott & Hulse, 2012). Other requirements for enrollment can include passing a written exam, physical fitness test, and drug testing. Departments also run background checks, require a high school diploma/GED, and are increasingly asking for at least two years of higher education (Zhao, Ren & Lovrich, 2010). After potential cadets have passed these basic requirements, they can truly begin to prove themselves to their peers and instructors.

There is no standardized content or level of expectation taught at a police academy; each institution delegates the education of whichever issues are most critical for the area. Usually, curricula of academies in various states follow state and training board standards, which mark certain topics that must be taught and the number of training hours required (Caro, 2011). Some locations, such as the Ohio Peace Officer Training Academy (OPOTA), have instructors complete a training course to ensure a minimum level of comprehension (Marion, 1998). Most instructors are retired or active police officers who are oftentimes chosen for their experience rather than their ability to teach (Marion, 1998). Harris (2008) argues that although practical experience can be useful, it can also be irrelevant, limited, and inferior to other types of knowledge. An instructor's personal biases and opinions from their time in the field can impair their ability to teach basic facts to the cadets.

Besides learning objectives and physical training, most organizations emphasize a change of ideology. A change of



mindset is required to adapt to a potentially dangerous occupation that may require the use of force. Individuals are stripped of individual characteristics and taught to accept a group ideology, such as in military boot camps, with group punishments and discipline, and respect of a chain of command (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010). Along with militarization come the beliefs of the traditional police culture, including institutionalized racism and sexism (Huisman et al., 2005). After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, homeland security has only increased in importance in officer training; civilian rights are being forcefully compromised in exchange for the illusion of safety (Oliver, 2006). Political, economic, and social factors consistently influence police practices, and it is during their time in the police academy that recruits learn a unified, bureaucratic way of responding to all of these factors.

Although academies vary in length of training and emphasis of various topics, certain consistencies are held across departments. Basic training can range anywhere from 400 to 800 hours, although various additional training is often implemented (Marion, 1998). The 188<sup>th</sup> Academy Recruit Class of the San Francisco Police Department spent a total of 1,080 hours on training over a 24-week period. 120 hours were spent on scenario based policing while 960 hours were spent on theoretical matters (Kinnaird, 2007). The LAPD, on the other hand, requires an 828-hour training course, including 230 hours of academics, 113 hours of firearms, and 140 hours of physical training (Kinnaird, 2007). Controversial topics such as domestic violence and racism are often only focused on for a few hours (Huisman et al., 2005). Topics from traditional police academies such as marksmanship, defensive tactics, and driving skills are an area of comfort that most police academies spend too much

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time on. Meanwhile, ideological tenets such as community engagement are met with resistance and skimmed over (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010). Other topics commonly taught in police academies can include: criminal and traffic law, human relations, police driving, officer safety techniques, and weapons training (Lane, 2005). Very little of the training involves open discussion, closing the opportunity for problem solving and practice in discretion.

### **Gender Consequences**

The traditional attitudes present in police academies reflect conservative, outdated attitudes relating to race and gender, the latter of which has found more evidence. Women did not play a significant role in the policing profession until around 1970, at which point only 2% of all officers were women (Zhao et al., 2010). Within the past 20 years, the number of female police officers has increased to 10%, although few women are found in senior positions (Burke & Mikkelsen, 2005). Women from multiple police departments report feeling that promotions of women are nothing more than public relations maneuvers. Departments report holding progressive and modern attitudes; however, women consistently face discrimination and feel discouraged from seeking advancement (Gao, Terrill, & Paoline, 2013). Considering the discrepancies present in the former statistics, specific mechanisms concerning gender must be present causing this void.

Initial reasons and motivations for joining the police profession show no differences concerning gender; rifts in ideology between men and women usually begin during training. Raganella and White (2004) conducted a study examining career motivations in policing between genders; opportunities to help

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people, job benefits, opportunities for career advancement, and early retirement dominated the top four responses for both genders. The least influential reasons, including lack of other career alternatives, salary, and power and authority were shared by both genders as well (Raganella & White, 2004). Despite similar career aspirations, gender integration and true equality in the police force have been historically avoided, only making progress through outside social forces and the law (Wilson & Buckler, 2010). Women choosing to pursue this historically male-dominated profession face many struggles once in the police academy.

During training in the police academy, traditional police viewpoints and beliefs are aired to the trainees, including stereotypes regarding women. The majority of instruction at the academy is highly reliant on the eagerness of instructors to share their experiences, regardless of being outdated or politically incorrect (Harris, 2008). For example, one training academy used episodes of the show *COPS* embellished with messages of hegemonic masculinity and racism to teach recruits (Prokos & Padavic, 2002). The class watched as a woman got her boyfriend taken away for domestic violence, yelling out names such as “bitch” and “pussy” to describe her behavior (Prokos & Padavic, 2002). Experiences like these in the academy and field training indoctrinate women into the hyper-masculine attitudes of police organizations, which have been prone to limiting female work to traditionally “feminine tasks” (Rabe-Hemp, 2008). Women’s progress is continuously stunted as men’s attitudes and skepticism prevent equality in the occupation.

Multiple other police training sessions produced similar results, reflecting strict masculinity-oriented beliefs. Another study documents battered immigrant women and women of color

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sharing their stories with a group of 90 police officers in training. The women were met with verbal and nonverbal resistance from the officers. A few vocal disrespectful comments set the tone, with a lack of respect shown throughout the training (Huisman et al., 2005). The trainees stared inappropriately, gave inappropriate comments on instructors' clothing and appearance, and shared stories of sexual encounters, leading the instructors to feel uncomfortable to the point of needing to be escorted out (Huisman et al., 2005). In various police trainings, women are outnumbered and forced to be silent or comply with the continuation of hegemonic masculinity and the "us vs. them" mentality fostered in traditional police trainings (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010). These inequalities are carried from the academy to fieldwork and patrols, eventually being administered into the community.

After graduating from the police academy, women continue to face the stereotypes that have been indoctrinated into their cohorts throughout training. The academy emphasizes the traditional role of police officers as crime-fighters who are masculine, aggressive, and rugged. These tenets present a dilemma for female officers: if they try to fit the masculine image, they are labeled "butch" or "dyke" and if they keep their femininity, they are seen as weak (Rabe-Hemp, 2008). A lack of rebellion on the part of the women comes from the paramilitary organizational structure learned in the academy: recruits must give up their personal liberties and opinions and submit to the authority structure of the organization (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010). Burke and Mikkelsen (2005) found women reporting more negative interactions in the workplace regarding gossip, sexual harassment, hazing, and verbal harassment by superiors. These findings are exaggerated in rural and small town

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police agencies, where women represent only 6% of municipal officers and are placed in lower ranks even more disproportionately than in larger cities (Rabe-Hemp, 2008). The lack of respect and promotions given to women are a direct reflection of attitudes toward gender hierarchy taught in the academy.

Gender segregated police training practices are implemented and visibly resisted in community responses. For over 30 years, battered women's advocates have been at odds with police organizations over a lack of action in defending and emphasizing domestic violence problems. Academy training does not properly prepare officers with the attitudes necessary to enforce or investigate domestic violence, especially in cases where men are the victims (Huisman et al., 2005). This is due, in part, to the very specific gender roles that are imagined within the ideologies of police officers. Kinnaird (2006) found that the most common complaints from the community that related to problems with training or policy were sexual and racial slurs from police officers. Police officers do not receive proper training on the sensitive issue of gender, and therefore may end up responding to situations inappropriately. One of the beliefs connecting women with crime is a negative framework, which states that when women violate the traditional roles set for them, they are likely to receive harsher punishment (Gabidon, Higgins & Potter, 2010). Although this framework does not always pan out, the gender stereotypes perpetuated in training academies are a definite part of the critical treatment given to women who violate gender stereotypes. The faulty training of officers on gender issues manifests itself not only in the treatment of female police officers, but also in the attitudes and treatment given to women in the general public.

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### **Policy Implications & Conclusion**

The gaps and inefficiencies with police academy training, especially concerning the treatment of women, are outdated and need to be finessed. In order to improve officer relations with the community, especially concerning treatment of women, changes need to be made at the academy phase of police training. Currently, only about 10% of what is learned at police training academies is applied in fieldwork (Caro, 2011). Therefore, structural changes in lesson plans need to relocate the amount of time and attention given to specific topics. Instead of spending the majority of instruction time on physical fitness and handling weapons, the majority of academy time needs to be allocated toward dealing with controversial topics such as racial profiling, gender stereotypes, and the use of discretion. Physical training should be removed from the academy completely; candidates should be responsible for gaining the proper level of physical fitness on their own time. To be held accountable for these topics, a “morality and decision-making” section would be added to the written portion of the police entrance exams. With this reallocation of time and responsibility, cadets will be forced to engage more deeply in controversial topics.

Although each state has its own policies concerning police academies and policing practices, more uniformity across the states would help efficiency in the criminal justice system. Just as the federal government regulates interstate commerce, it is essential to delegate policing to the federal government as well, since crime can move freely through and across states. Similar practices for policing would hold all police departments to the same guidelines, avoiding situations such as: civil litigation due to officer misconduct, diminished community trust in the police, less public cooperation, and other difficulties

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(Caro, 2011). Standards for police academies and qualifications for police work need to be streamlined in order to clarify laws as well as aid the public in being able to hold police officers accountable for their actions.

Policing practices pertaining to dealing with women need to be sanctioned in order to allow officers less leeway. Currently, officers operate within concentric circles, meaning certain groups are affected by the corruption of police practices more than others (Petras, James, Abaya & Eastman, 2012). To alleviate this, officers' personal views need to be removed from the way they administer justice. Temporary quotas enforced throughout police departments mandating officers of different ethnicities, genders, and religions to be paired together will eventually allow for a less biased police force. Along with this, officers need to be held responsible for upholding the ideals of community policing, and taking the diversity of each neighborhood into account when patrolling. Examples of progressive police departments should be mirrored: developments to Florida police departments emphasize diversity, community relations, and problem-solving; testing this knowledge with scenarios and regular debriefings hold officers accountable for understanding the information (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010). Legislation announcing this unified approach to policing would be a crucial step in moving forward the ideology of policing.

Policing has always been a part of the justice system put in the spotlight by public perceptions and criticisms. The origins of policing in the United States were corrupt, reflecting racist ideologies. Since then, police practices have been moving toward a more publicly acceptable method of law enforcement. Regardless, large problems with police academies are going to

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continue manifesting themselves with lackluster officer performance in the field if they remain unchanged. Currently, policing negatively affects certain groups disproportionately; women are discriminated against throughout training, on the job, and in interactions with officers. Past research indicates that the macho attitudes propagated during training have lasting effects on officer attitudes. If significant policy changes and structural developments are not made to police academies and patrols, these unethical attitudes will continue to reflect themselves in interactions with the public. In order for policing to move away from its current state as a paramilitary-bureaucratic organization and finally reflect the ideals of a democracy, policing organizations will require costly and time-consuming reconstruction.

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