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# Trends & issues

in crime and criminal justice



Australian Government  
Australian Institute of Criminology

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**Foreword** | *At 30 June 2006, 23 percent of Australian police were women, almost double the percentage in 1996. Despite this change, the issues relevant a decade earlier remain today, namely difficulties in recruitment and deployment and the low representation of women within senior ranks. This paper examines the career paths of one cohort of police sworn in during 1991 in a number of jurisdictions, to examine what differences, if any, exist between the male and female personnel in terms of recruitment, rank attainment, departures and deployment. The findings indicate that recruitment of women in policing in Australia has generally doubled in the decade, but that a higher proportion of men than of women have attained the more senior ranks. Women, however, attained promotions more quickly than did men. Some states also had higher departure rates of female officers than others, and there are gender disparities in reasons for departure and in some areas of policing. National, continuous monitoring is required to track these trends, and research in greater depth is needed to investigate reasons for the differences identified between male and female police and between jurisdictions.*

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## Career trajectories of women in policing in Australia

Rachelle Irving

The lack of women within the senior ranks of law enforcement agencies continues to be a problem in Australia as well as overseas. As the proportion of women in policing continues to increase over time, it should be anticipated that the number who occupy senior positions will also increase, albeit slowly. A preliminary examination of the career progression of a cohort of police from 1991 indicates, however, that a greater proportion of males have attained the higher ranks, although the few females who have done so have attained them faster than their male counterparts.

Baxter and Wright (2000) found that substantial increases in female police numbers are necessary in order to achieve small increases in the numbers of women in senior management. Increasing female numbers alone is not, however, an assurance of increased female numbers in management positions; this will require efforts to ensure specifically that women be given the opportunities to learn to become competent managers (Etter 1996).

Although writing at a time when the role of women in policing was more restricted, Van Velsor and Hughes (1990) found that female police managers did not obtain the diversity of experience that their male counterparts did, tending to impede their promotional prospects. A study of women in the United States also found that women were over-represented in community and administrative policing roles while under-represented in various specialist areas (Van Velsor & Hughes 1990). Similar problems of under-representation of women in policing exist in England and Wales. Although the proportion of female police officers rose from 16 percent in 1998 to 23 percent in March 2007 (Ford 2008)—a 44 percent relative increase over the decade—the same cannot be said of those in the higher ranks.

For example, in relation to senior (in Australia, commissioned) officers, the proportion of females is small both in England and Wales (as of 2004: Christopherson & Cotton 2004) and in Australia (as of 2006), with only eight percent of senior officers being female in both countries.

In Australia, there was a 70 percent increase in the overall proportion of women in policing in the period 1996 to 2006, considerably higher than the 44 percent increase in England and Wales over a similar period. Currently, exactly the same proportion (23%) of police officers in England and Wales and in Australia are female.

The present study sought to track the careers and deployment of one cohort of officers in Australia over time, to establish the extent of the problem of restricted career progression. Early results indicate that no such problem necessarily exists, with the exception of deployment in major crime, investigative, and traffic areas.

### Career progression study

Until recently, policing agencies did not systematically collect information on the proportion of women in different roles and ranks in the Australian states and territories (Prenzler & Hayes 2000). The Australian Institute of Criminology gathers information about the composition of Australia's police services according to rank and gender on an annual basis, but more-precise information about actual tasks performed and the time taken to attain promotions was not available. Without such detail, policy questions relevant to the recruitment and retention of female police in Australia cannot be answered.

In order to gain a better insight into the career progression of female police officers, the present study undertook a retrospective mapping of the career paths of every police officer sworn in during 1991. The aim was to follow the careers of this cohort of officers

over time in order to provide an insight into factors that may contribute to or detract from career progression.

The AIC requested information about all police sworn in during 1991: their sex, year of birth, rank attained, sections and locations worked in, and, if applicable, departure information.

All of the state and territory police services indicated a willingness to participate in the study, although some were unable to do so, due to problems in extracting the requested data. As a result, fully participating states and territories were New South Wales, Western Australia, and the Australian Capital Territory. Tasmania and Victoria also participated but were able to supply information about their recruits from only 1992 and 1997 respectively, meaning that for the large part Victoria had to be excluded from the analysis. The ACT was also excluded from some of the analyses, due to the skewed gender proportions of its 1991 intake, which consisted of 19 females and only four males.

The 1991 cohort from New South Wales, Western Australia, and the Australian Capital Territory comprised 638 police, including 138 females and 500 males. Figure 1 shows the sex distribution in each of the four states and the ACT.

### Recruitment

In 1996, 13.5 percent of all Australian police service personnel were female. By 30 June 2006, this had increased to approximately 23 percent, which represents a 70 percent relative increase in the proportion of female personnel over the decade, or an average relative increase of approximately seven percent every year.

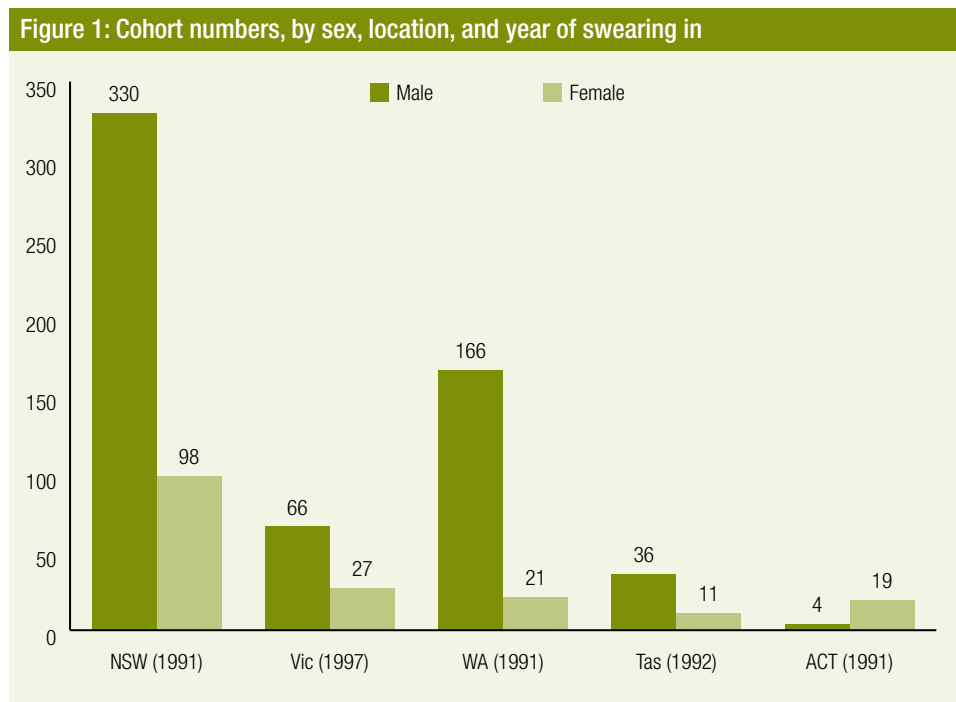
In relation to the proportion of female recruits, however, the rate of increase has been slower. In 1995, 23 percent of police recruits nationally were female, and in 2006, 35 percent (a 52% relative increase on the original proportion over the 11 years). The proportion of female recruits has also varied considerably between states and territories, fluctuating by up to five percent in any year in the same period.

The differences between states and territories in relation to the numbers of female officers could be attributable to a variety of factors. Arguably, alternative careers are more readily available in some states and territories than in others. Policing in some locations is seen as a less attractive career option than in other places, and some states and territories employ more-effective recruitment strategies than others or devote more resources to advertising and promotion of policing as a career option for women. In Victoria, for example, whereas more than 24 percent of new recruits were female in 1995, the proportion in 2006 had risen to 43 percent.

Of the cohort examined, based on data relating to the time of swearing in, different jurisdictions' proportions of female officers ranged from 11 to 23 percent. Although the proportion of female recruits has increased considerably over time, it will take a substantially longer period for changes to show as progression through the ranks.

### Rank attainment

The proportion of female officers through the ranks has increased slowly. Between 1995 and 2006, the proportion of female constables increased from 17 to 27 percent;



Source: AIC Women in Policing Dataset 0109 [computer file]

**Figure 2: Rank attainment at 31 December 2005, by sex (percent members of cohort)**



Source: AIC Women in Policing Dataset 0109 [computer file]

**Figure 3: Number from the 1991 New South Wales cohort leaving each year, 1999–2005 (percent)**



Source: AIC Women in Policing Dataset 0109 [computer file]

the proportion of female sergeants / senior sergeants, from four to 11 percent; and the proportion of female commissioned officers, in still relatively low percentages: from two to eight.

By the end of 2005, of the 538 officers in the 1995 cohort who were still serving, 20 percent were female and 80 percent were male; 144 had attained the rank of sergeant or above; and 84 percent of the highest-ranking staff members were male.

The majority of staff members were still at senior constable rank, 79 percent of those being female (Figure 2).

Although proportionately fewer females in the cohort had attained the higher ranks, the females who had done so at a faster rate than their male colleagues. On average it had taken 15 years for males to attain inspector rank, and 13 years for females to do so.

## Departures

Analysis was also conducted of those in the cohort who had left policing as a career. This included those who had resigned, retired, died on duty, or been removed as a result of disciplinary action. As at 31 December 2005, the average time that cohort personnel took to depart was 10 years by males and 11 years by females. Only New South Wales and Western Australia provided information about personnel who had left policing, with New South Wales also detailing reasons for their departure.

In New South Wales, twice the proportion of cohort males as of cohort females left policing due to general retirement. The inverse was the case in medical reasons for retirement: six percent of cohort females resigned due to medical reasons, and three percent of the cohort males did so. None of the cohort females left policing due to death or disciplinary removal, and 0.6 percent and 1.5 percent of the male cohort left for these reasons respectively. Five percent of the male cohort and nine percent of the female cohort did not specify a reason for departing.

Figure 3 shows the breakdown of the cohort of police in New South Wales who had departed as at 31 December 2005. None of the cohort had departed prior to 1999, during the first eight years of their service, but there was a consistent flow of departures annually from 2000 on. Of the original 428 officers in the New South Wales cohort, 63 (15%) had left the service by 31 December 2005: 21 percent of female and 13 percent of male officers.

This contrasts with the Western Australian cohort, who began departing from 1992, the year following their swearing in. Of the original 187 Western Australian police in the cohort, 27 percent had left policing by 2006, almost twice the comparable rate in New South Wales. It is difficult to draw conclusions about the differences between these two states, as the Western Australian cohort's reasons for departure were not provided. When the Western Australian and

New South Wales cohorts were compared, a marked gender difference between the two states was apparent.

Of the 63 New South Wales officers who had departed, 67 percent were male and 33 percent were female. This was quite different from the 27 percent (of 187 officers) in the Western Australian cohort who had left policing, 94 percent of whom were male, six percent female. In Western Australia, males in the cohort departed at almost 16 times the rate of their female counterparts. This differed from both New South Wales and Tasmania, whose males departed at only twice the rate of their female counterparts. In Tasmania, the overall departure rate was considerably higher than those of New South Wales and Western Australia, with 36 percent of the original 47 officers in the cohort having departed. The sex breakdown of the departed group was nearly identical to that of the New South Wales group: 65 percent males, 35 percent females.

Western Australia had a very high male departure rate as well as an uncharacteristically low female departure rate. This could partially be explained by the fact that both the New South Wales and Tasmanian cohorts both originally comprised 77 percent males whereas the Western

Australian cohort comprised 89 percent males. Even so, it would appear that the departure rate for males in Western Australia was disproportionate in comparison with those of New South Wales and Tasmania. Explanations for these differences requires further research on the reasons for departure from all state and territory police services.

In an attempt to understand whether which sections the departing officers had worked in had any bearing on their reasons for leaving, further analysis was undertaken of the entire cohort. Drawing conclusions without knowing the sex breakdown of staff of the sections and that of the sworn personnel is difficult, although some trends can be discerned.

It appears that only in traffic sections was male officers' departure rate disproportionately high. The numbers of other staff who had departed from various sections were too small to allow any trends to be observed.

## Deployment

Lack of experience in various areas is believed to be one of the main barriers to career advancement of women within police services. Wilkinson and Froyland (1996)

argued that police need to have experience in a range of locations and situations if they are to attain positions of leadership. Prenzler (1995) also viewed the dearth of women in the higher ranks of policing as being due to the limited opportunities for deployment in specialist areas.

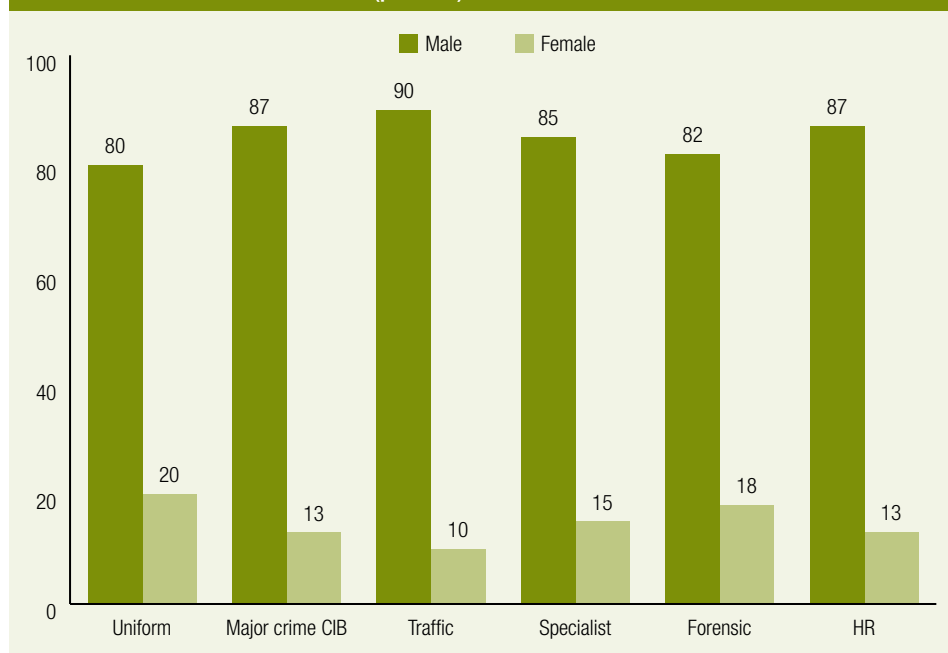
Figure 4 provides an indication of the sex distribution of the entire cohort as at 31 December 2005, among the sections that they had worked in. In Western Australia, New South Wales and Tasmania, the sex ratio of cohort members who had worked in the listed sections during 2005 constituted 80 to 90 percent males, 10 to 20 percent females. The overall gender composition too of the cohort in these states was 80 percent males and 20 percent females.

Sections that had the highest ratios of males to females were the traffic section and the major crime and criminal investigations branch (CIB). In terms of promotional prospects in relation to differing sections, it is too early to draw conclusions, as the majority of the cohort had only attained lower to middle ranks.

In New Zealand, Hyman (2000) examined the barriers to the recruitment, progress, and retention of women in the criminal investigation branch of New Zealand Police. Using focus groups composed of male and female CIB members, she found that the majority of female members felt that they were at a disadvantage over their male counterparts due to a lack of role models and mentors. It was also perceived that their being part of a minority group meant receiving increased scrutiny and feeling that they had to 'fit in' and to establish credibility within their office by performing better than male staff members were expected to. Many believed that errors made by females were attributed to their gender rather than being specific to the officer in question.

It would be useful to conduct interviews with members of the current cohort, replicating the research conducted by Hyman (2000) so as to determine whether Australian perceptions of barriers to progression are similar to New Zealand perceptions.

**Figure 4: Sex ratio of members of NSW, WA, and Tas cohorts working in each section as of 31 December 2005 (percent)**



Source: AIC Women in Policing Dataset 0109 [computer file]

Examination of the data from the cohorts in New South Wales, Western Australia and Tasmania shows that the ratio of males to females working in uniformed sections over time has remained relatively constant at about four to one, even though actual numbers of uniformed staff have almost halved, from 609 to 318.

This ratio is consistent with the data from the original New South Wales, Western Australian, and Tasmanian combined cohort, which comprised 80 percent males and 20 percent females. Changes over time in the numbers of cohort officers in the major crime sections and criminal investigation branches differ from those in relation to uniformed operations. Instead of reducing in number, the numbers have doubled or trebled every three years. This is understandable given the investigative skills and training required in these areas. What is also noticeable is that since 1999, the representation of male cohort officers in these sections has consistently been higher than that of female ones, far exceeding the overall 79 percent male – 21 percent female distribution. The reasons for this warrant further research.

Although actual numbers are quite low, there are consistent patterns among police services in relation to the gender balance of officers working in traffic sections. Over the 12-year period, neither the numbers nor the sex ratios have fluctuated greatly. Certainly the 90–97 percent representation by males in these sections is much higher than the 80 percent cohort representation. Once again, it is difficult to attribute reasons for this sex imbalance without further research, and it cannot be assumed that it is due to organisational barriers. It may be the case that males tend to be more interested in performing the tasks associated with traffic branches, including traffic-bike duties and one-person patrols.

Other specialist areas, such as surveillance, tactical, water-police, forensic, and dog-squad units, had male-to-female ratios similar to that of the original cohort. It appears that the proportion of males

working in these areas continues to increase, thus indicating a need for recruitment of women in these areas.

Fewer than 10 staff members from the cohort worked in human resources and support sections prior to 2002. It appears that the proportion of males in these sections may have been increasing since 2002, contrary to commonly held expectations of the high proportion of female officers working in these areas.

## Barriers

It has been argued that traditional police cultures and entrenched negative attitudes toward women within policing have been partly responsible for the low percentage of women reaching senior management positions. Recent research has indicated that these influences may be beginning to change (Silvestri 2007). More-positive attitudes to female police have also resulted in improved relationships between police departments and their communities (Miller 1999).

Difficulties also face some women working in policing because of the inability to terminate rostered shifts while working in the middle of a crisis situation or investigation. Given that women still hold the predominant care-giving role in relation to child-raising, shiftwork can pose difficulties for those trying to balance family responsibilities with shiftwork and overtime.

There has been some change in workplaces generally, allowing more flexibility through options such as part-time work, but recent research has found that it is predominantly women who are still affected by the difficulties of balancing work and family. Adams (2001) found that significantly more females than males reported that their work interfered with their family life. Male officers were less likely, however, to be married / de facto and to have dependants.

These research findings highlight the need for police services to develop flexible work options to ensure that females not be disadvantaged by the responsibilities associated with family and child-rearing and that appropriate support be offered

to women who choose to return to policing after having had children.

## Limitations of the study

The findings from this study relate primarily to a cohort from three states. As such, they are not necessarily representative of trends throughout Australian policing. In addition, recruitment strategies vary considerably among states and over time, with some police services targeting particular personality profiles or attributes at specified times.

The rank structures and promotional system for each state and territory are different too, so rank-based findings should be interpreted with some caution.

It should also be noted that for comparison of the cohort members, sections had to be grouped that in one state may perform work not entirely the same as in another state or territory.

## Conclusions

Over the decade to 2006, policing in Australia improved greatly in terms of gender equity. The most noticeable change for women in policing is the increase in police recruit numbers, which now reflect a much improved gender balance in most states and territories.

The present study sought to present data on a large cohort of police officers around the nation, tracking their career over time. In order for research of this kind to be conducted in the future, all police services will need to revise their human-resources data collections to make tracking of career paths possible.

Already, however, it can be seen from the analysis of the first 15 years of the cohort's service that there are a number of findings of interest and importance. In summary, these include the following:

- the differences in sex ratios between states and territories, i.e. in recruitment
- sex disparity in the reasons for leaving policing, e.g. higher female medical retirements
- differences among the states and territories in time of departure, e.g. some states not having departures for several years while some have them almost immediately
- possible higher departure rates for particular sections, e.g. traffic branch
- consistency of sections' sex ratios with the original cohort ratio, except in traffic and major crime sections, where there appears to be an over-representation of cohort males.

Wilkinson and Froyland (1996) reported that the potential contribution of carefully selected and well-trained women is enormous. In order to achieve this, strategies need to be developed for both recruitment and subsequent years of service.

In England and Wales, for example, which currently has the same proportion of female police officers as in Australia, the Home Office is undertaking consultations to set targets in the recruitment of female officers (Ford 2008). The aim is to increase the representation of women in policing generally, but also to increase the number of women reaching the most senior ranks.

Efforts are needed beyond the recruitment phase also. In particular, a concerted emphasis and flexible work options that support work-life balance are required in order to foster senior female managers who can serve as mentors for younger female

officers. This would ideally lead to a higher proportion of women's achieving the highest ranks as well as positions in specialist areas such as criminal investigations. Over time, this would increase both the range and the quality of services that Australian police could offer the community.

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