

Do Female Officers Improve Law Enforcement Quality?

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Abstract

Law enforcement has historically been a male profession, and it remains so today. Nevertheless, the share of female officers in local police forces has increased dramatically since the late 1970s. This paper examines the relationship between female representation on local police forces and law enforcement quality, by focusing on the rate at which crimes are reported to police, especially crimes against female victims. This measures a key input into the production of law enforcement and also reflects the degree of trust felt by crime victims toward police. Violent crimes against women are thought to be severely under-reported and advocates argue that hiring more female officers, and assigning them to handle these cases, can be an essential strategy for increasing reporting rates and deterring future crimes.

Using panel data on local US crime reporting spanning over a decade and a fixed effects regression framework with controls for economic and policy variables, we find that violent crimes against females are significantly more likely to be reported to police when the local police has a greater share of female officers. We find no effect for crimes against males. The increase in female reporting (both absolute and relative to males) is strongest for domestic violence, in which the victim was or had been romantically involved with the attacker. This supports the hypothesis that female officers may be especially effective at increasing the willingness of female victims to report personal crimes that can be especially sensitive to discuss, and in which a fear of retaliation from the attacker is heightened. In contrast to these strong relationships for female representation among police officers, we find no effect from changes in the share of female civilian employees at police departments on crime reporting.

(joint with Amalia Miller)