



'Second Thoughts': The Confidence Gap in Female Police Officers' Decision-Making

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Source Article

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Take Home Messages

- In simulations of snap decision-making under pressure, female police officers performed equally to male officers in terms of decision time, perceived difficulty of the scenarios, and the appropriateness of their behaviour.
- However, female police officers exhibited significantly less confidence in their decisions compared to their male counterparts.
- These results may reflect the pressures faced by female officers due to stereotypes and the prevailing masculine-conservative police culture.

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Why did the researchers conduct the study?

Despite their presence in police services for decades, women made up only 20% of European police officers in 2020.¹ This gender disparity has led governments to implement measures to promote gender equality in policing, which some feel will also enhance police effectiveness and police-community relations.² However, these measures can create perceptions that women are promoted based on gender rather than merit.³ This has led some researchers to examine gender differences in tasks relevant to policing, such as decision-making.

Studies on general decision-making reveal differences based on gender. For example, women tend to use all available information to make decisions, while also considering the benefits and consequences of their decisions. Men, on the other hand, tend to focus on information that supports goal-oriented decisions (i.e., decisions related to setting or striving for goals).⁴ Compared to men, women are also more likely to seek support when making decisions, prefer interpersonal decision-making styles, make less risky decisions, and take more time to decide.⁵

Few studies have analyzed gender differences in police decision-making. The research in the [source article](#) helps fill this gap by focusing on critical situations requiring snap-second, high-stake decisions under uncertainty. Only one study has examined this issue to date, but that study was limited in various ways (e.g., only 26% of the sample in that study was female).⁶ The purpose of the research described in this brief was to examine gender-based police decision-making while addressing these limitations.

How did the researchers conduct the study?

The study involved 290 students from the Guardia Civil College in Spain, with an equal number of males and females in the study, aged 18 to 25.

Participants used their mobile phones to complete the study. The core task presented participants with the DISPUTE (Decision-Making Immersive Scenarios in Police Uncertain Tactical Environments) framework. This featured three written scenarios designed through expert interviews with Guardia Civil officers, depicting realistic situations that required decisions under uncertainty and risk. Each scenario was plausible and context-rich, yet sufficiently ambiguous for participants to interpret.

Each scenario included an initial context and a subsequent conflict, prompting participants to decide between immediate action or waiting for more information. If participants chose to wait for more information, additional information was provided, and the decision cycle was repeated up to three times. Following the scenario, participants rated the difficulty of the situation and their confidence in their decision on a scale from 1 to 5.

In the first scenario, officers in a residential area checkpoint received information about possible violent incidents in a nearby commercial center. In the second scenario, officers on duty at a yacht club during a storm alert had to decide whether to jump into the sea to rescue a young person who had fallen into the water, with rescue services potentially arriving too late. The third scenario involved a domestic violence situation where officers had to decide whether to intervene at an address with no response to their calls.

The researchers measured the time taken to make decisions, the perceived difficulty of the scenarios, and the participants' confidence in

their decisions. Experts also assessed whether the decisions made were correct or not.

What did the researchers find?

Female participants did not differ from male participants in the time taken to make decisions or the perceived difficulty of the situations. According to the experts, participants made the right decision in only 24% of the trials, but again, no differences in correctness appeared between males and females.

An important finding was that female participants exhibited significantly less confidence in their decisions than males. This could be because female participants were experiencing stereotype threat, where individuals fear confirming negative stereotypes about their social group. For example, in other domains, stereotype threat has been linked to more unfavourable risk decisions by women.⁷ The masculine and conservative police culture likely worsens this stereotype threat effect, as female officers may feel constantly judged by the actions they take and the decisions they make. Gender-based confidence differences were particularly evident in scenario 2, which required high physical ability, potentially challenging female officers' confidence.

How can the police use these findings?

Practical implications of the research described in the [source article](#) for police services include the need to:

Recognize Equal Performance: Female officers performed equally well (or not as well) as male

officers in decision-making time and perceived difficulty, indicating no inherent difference in decision-making capabilities under pressure. This has direct implications in terms of equality in job selection and allocation.

Improve Training Programs: Only a quarter of participants made decisions aligned with expert recommendations, highlighting a need for reflective practice in snap decision-making within the educational curriculum for police officers (i.e., reflecting on one's decisions or actions to engage in a process of continuous learning).

Address Confidence Issues: The finding that female officers displayed less confidence in their decisions underscores the importance of developing programs to boost confidence levels among female officers. Implementing interventions to mitigate stereotype threat may help female officers feel less judged and more confident in their roles.

Promote Self-awareness: Interestingly, by showing less confidence in what was, in practice, poor performance, female officers showed a higher level of self-awareness. Training programs should encourage this self-awareness across all officers to foster more realistic self-assessment and improvement.

Foster an Inclusive Culture: The traditionally masculine and conservative police culture may contribute to the challenges faced by female officers. Promoting an inclusive and supportive environment can help reduce the pressure on female officers and improve their overall performance and satisfaction.

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