Despite an increase in the number of female police officers in U.S. police agencies, female representation in supervisory (sergeant and lieutenant) and command (captain, assistant chief and chief) positions in most agencies is limited. This research study focuses on the promotional aspirations as an explanation of limited female representation with attention to the decision-making criteria female police officers use when deciding to participate in the promotional process. This study also examines the institutional, political, organizational structures, and/or personal factors which may impact the female police officers’ decisions to participate in the promotion process. Moreover, this study examines a factor mentioned but not researched by Archbold and Hassell (2009) of how being married to a fellow police officer (or part of a “cop couple”) can restrict the upward mobility of female police officers. Furthermore, prior studies of promotional aspirations of female police officers as an explanation of the limited representation in supervisory and command positions were limited to one police department for each study. This study expands the scope of promotional aspirations and other factors with inquiries sent to 135 local police agencies with 14,299 sworn officers in the Great Lakes region of the United States.
Of the 14,299 sworn officers, 1,658 are female. Twenty-one of the 135 agencies with 451 sworn female officers responded to the inquiry (15.5% response rate). Twenty-seven of the 451 (6% response rate) female police officers who met the eligibility requirements for promotion participated in the semi-structured interviews, utilizing a questionnaire modified from a questionnaire by Archbold and Hassell (2009). Interview data were analyzed by the primary researcher and a secondary researcher without law enforcement experience to identify primary dimensions with supporting conceptual categories and properties.

Findings of this study reveal that the primary factors female police officers influencing the decision of whether or not to pursue promotion were shift assignment, duty assignment, and the impact on children/family life. Limitations of the study were the small sample size and limited region of the country making generalization of findings difficult, if not impossible. Additionally, there was a disproportionate representation from each of the five states. Although each state was represented by a female officer, some states only had one officer represent it while others, such as Wisconsin, which had thirteen, and Michigan, which had nine, had multiple representatives. By identifying the factors female police officers utilize when deciding whether or not to pursue promotion, this study was able to make recommendations for potential administrative changes which may encourage more female police officers to pursue promotion.