



Women Enter Public Service Sooner, But They Don't Usually Stay Longer

New Rutgers SPAA Research Shows That Gender Relates to Individuals' Start in Government and Nonprofit Jobs, But Not Always How Long They Stay

Practical Takeaways

- **Recruitment matters:** Gender differences show up powerfully at entry points. Early-career outreach can serve as a high-leverage moment for meeting representation goals.
- **One strategy will not fit every job:** Agencies should calibrate recruitment and retention efforts to the gender make-up of the specific profession they are hiring for. Male- and female-dominated professions require different strategies.
- **Watch the back door in male-dominated roles:** Where women are the minority, they exit faster. Mentorship, professional development, and cultural initiatives matter most in these roles.

SOURCE:

Marrese, T., Liu, Y., & Handy, F. (2026). The gendered path of least resistance: First entry and exit behaviors of public and nonprofit employees. *Public Administration Review*.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.70181>

EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW: Two Different Decisions, Two Different Stories

Women hold 57.0% of public sector jobs and 66.0% of nonprofit jobs. The common explanation is that employment in these sectors is simply better for women: more flexible, more inclusive, more mission-driven.

New research from Rutgers University's Tiana Marrese (SPAA), with Ying Liu (Rutgers PhD alumna, now at University of Rhode Island) and Femida Handy (University of Pennsylvania), tests that assumption by watching early career decisions unfold rather than counting heads. Following a cohort of millennials from adolescence through 2019, the study separates two distinct decisions: the choice to take a job in a sector and the choice to stay in the job.

The research finds that these two behaviors look different for men and women; women enter their first public and nonprofit job significantly faster than men. Interestingly, once inside, they do not stay longer at these jobs, on average. Marrese and coauthors further poke at this sector-wide picture to reveal an important caveat: in professions dominated by men, such as policing, firefighting, and law, women exhibit shorter stays. Together, this research shows that the woman-heavy presence in public and nonprofit sectors may be highly related to who walks in, while certain professions maintain this difference through who walks out.

Two Decisions, Not One

A career is not a single choice. The study breaks down sector of employment into two separate forces and measures each on its own.

- **Attraction** is how quickly someone takes their first job in a sector. It reflects what draws people to a role.
- **Attachment** is how long they remain once they arrive. It reflects what keeps people in a role.

Most existing studies on public and nonprofit employment look at point-in-time statistics or workers' stated intentions. This study suggests that a gendered nuance is hidden within these approaches: men and women may vary in their propensities to (1) start a job and to (2) stay at a job. Existing research does not fully capture this.

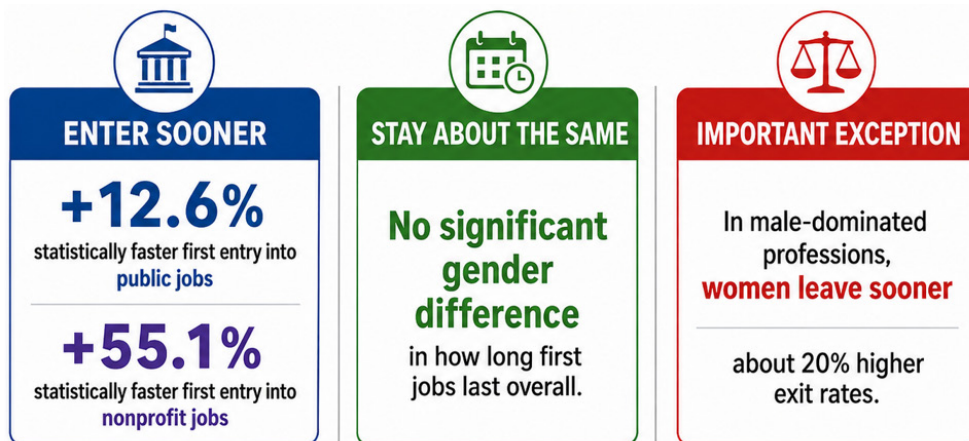
Why It Matters for New Jersey

New Jersey employs hundreds of thousands of people across state agencies, county and municipal government, school districts, and a large nonprofit sector. Many of these employers have adopted representation and equity goals, and many measure progress by workforce composition.

These findings raise two considerations for NJ employers. First, there seems to be a gendered difference in attraction to public and nonprofit work. Employers should be mindful of this variation when looking at who is (or is not) in their applicant pool. Second, in departments where women are a minority, such as police and fire, composition targets will not hold without deliberate attention to why women leave. Hiring more women into a profession where they exit faster produces movement in the numbers, not durable change.

Women Enter First Public & Nonprofit Jobs Sooner—But Don't Stay Longer.

Two decisions: entering a job and staying in it.



Representation depends on both who enters and who stays.

Key Findings

Public and nonprofit organizations are often described as “model employers” for women, and the workforce numbers appear to back that up. But a high percentage of women can be produced two very different ways: by attracting more women, or by keeping them longer. The research provided a nuanced look at the ways that entry and exit behaviors differ by gender.

- **Women enter public and nonprofit sectors faster than men.** Women showed a 12.6% higher rate of

first entry into public sector work and a 55.1% higher rate into nonprofit work, controlling for education, income, marital status, children, occupation, industry, and geography.

- **Women do not stay longer than men.** At the sector level, the study found no significant gender difference in how long a first stint in public or nonprofit work lasted.
- **Attraction concentrates in female-dominated professions.** Women were 68.8% more likely than men to enter a female-dominated

public profession and 94.3% more likely to enter a female-dominated nonprofit profession, but 39.0% less likely to enter a male-dominated public profession.

- **Women leave male-dominated professions sooner.** Women did not showcase different exit behavior for female-dominated professions but exited male-dominated public professions at a 20.4% higher rate and male-dominated nonprofit professions at a 19.2% higher rate. The sector-wide finding of “no difference” masks this variation.

Bottom Line

A representative workforce is the sum of two decisions: the choice to enter and the choice to stay. Delivering on the promise of public service means paying attention to both.