

# Policewomen, Plainclothes, and Pelvic Examinations: NYPD Abortion Investigations, 1913 – 1926

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## INTRODUCTION

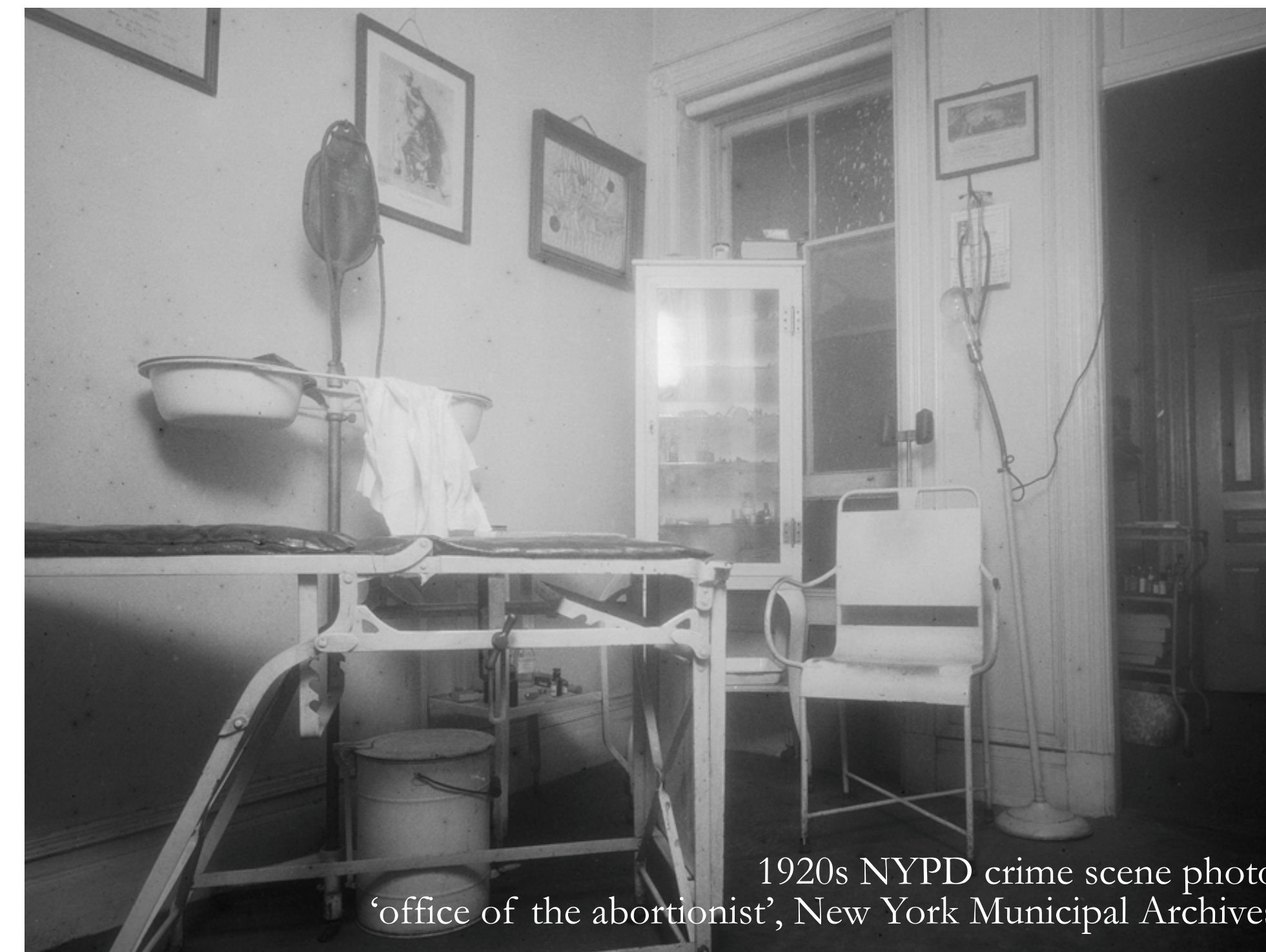
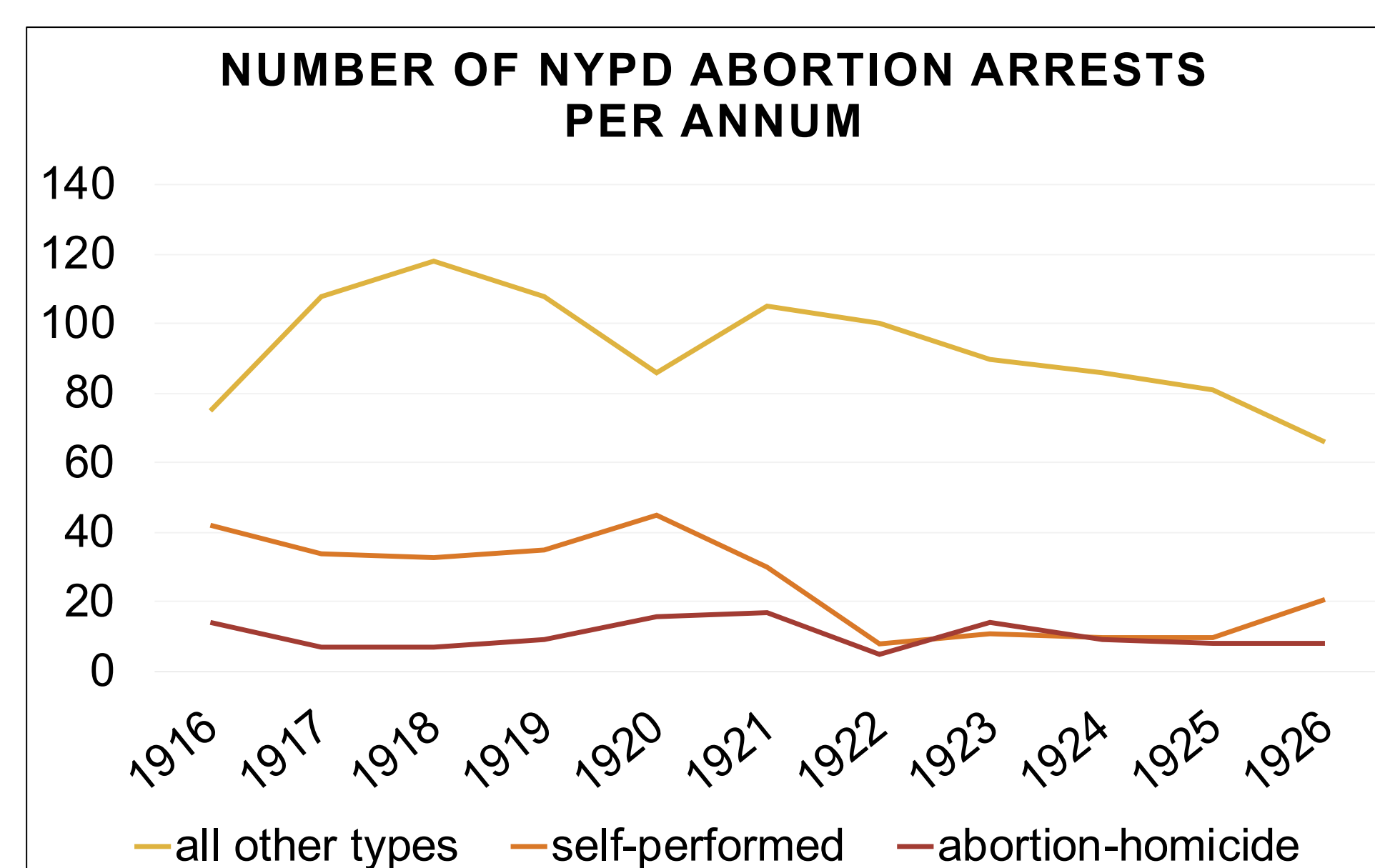
Using newly available sources—district attorney felony indictments—my project examines how policewomen went undercover to investigate abortion between 1913 and 1926. Policewomen posed as women seeking abortions, submitted to pelvic exams, and arrested over forty midwives, most of whom were immigrant women from eastern and southern Europe.

## Policing Abortion

Previous histories of abortion argue that the state primarily policed abortionists who caused a woman's death. But, abortion-homicides were a minority of New York abortion arrests. The state was more interested and inventive in regulating abortion than previously thought.

Women entered the NYPD as matrons in the 1890s, responsible for the stationhouse and female detainees. For ambitious matrons, going undercover became the main route to promotion. Unlike the middle-class reformers typically associated with the Progressive-era, matrons were working class, often widows, and many immigrants themselves.

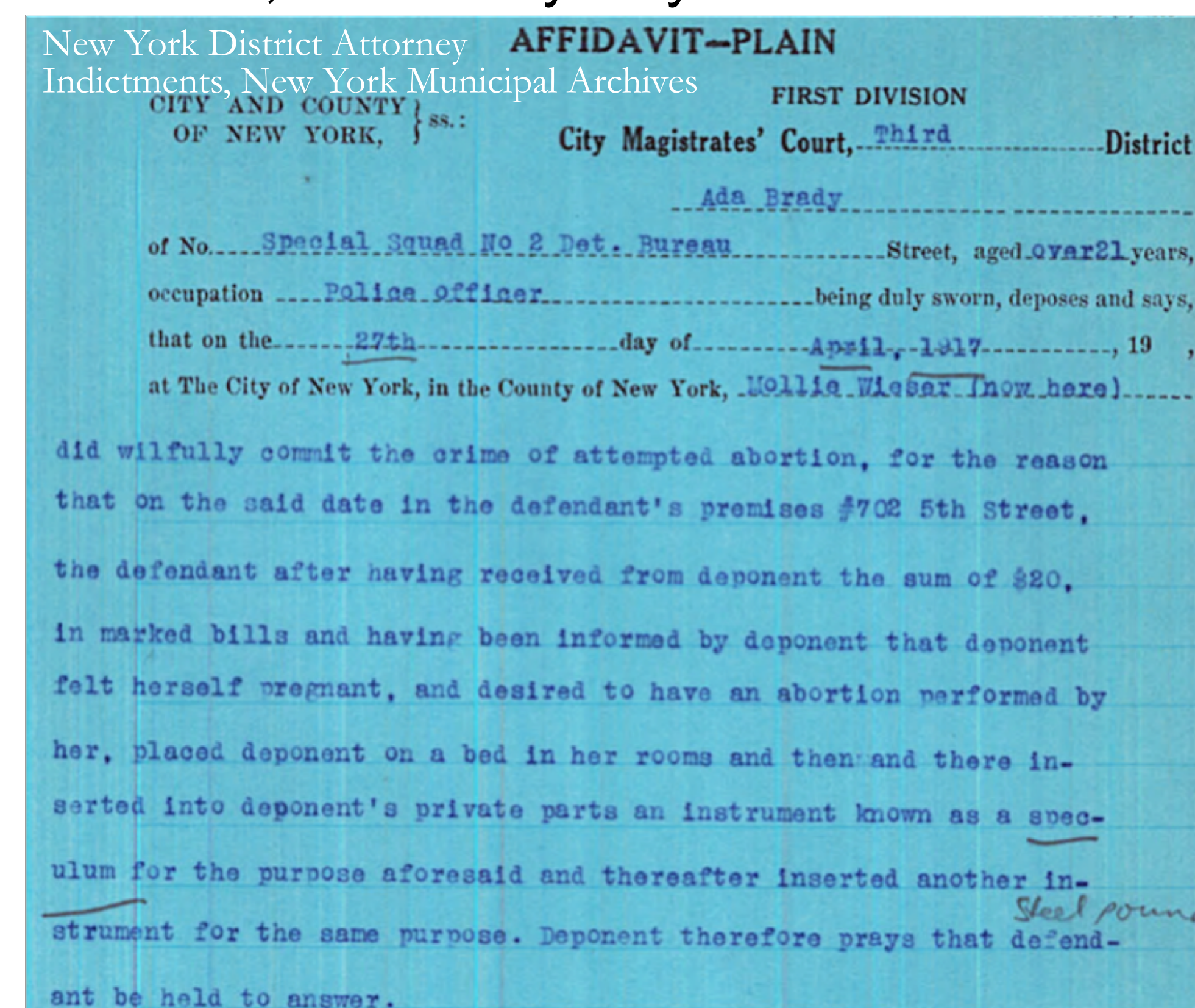
Through matrons, the NYPD extended its reach into female and immigrant networks and spaces that hitherto eluded them.



## Going Undercover

To invoke the eugenic spectre of 'race suicide', contemporary medical and popular discourse argued upper-class anglo-protestant women most frequently sought abortions.

Yet, the NYPD did not police these women. Instead, matrons posed as working-class women and used foreign language skills and accents to target immigrant neighbourhoods. Matrons constructed narratives of reproductive vulnerability and told stories of health problems, poverty, and existing children. They sought to create community with the midwives; community they then subverted.



*Women criminals sometimes “get away with it” when only the men police officers are involved by the artful use of their feminine charms. I have known it to happen. Not so when the policewoman is on the trail.*

International Association of Policewomen bulletin (1927)



## Women's Professional Precarity

Midwives protested police surveillance through legal protective associations, circulated descriptions of investigators, and even exploited policewomen's professional precarity in trials. One midwife alleged she performed a pelvic exam, not to carry out an abortion, but because she thought the policewoman had syphilis. Another midwife argued she only examined the policewoman as she 'was very fat...her stomach was very fat'.<sup>1</sup>

Policewomen were gatekeepers of feminine respectability, but this investigative process entailed they act disreputably. All-male courtrooms focused on how a policewoman undressed and the moment instruments were inserted into her vagina. Although they were representatives of the state, policewomen's respectability was scrutinised in trials.

Nonetheless, for policewomen this work led to financial gain, honour roll commendation, and promotion. Policewomen's professional advance was tied to their surveillance and control of other women's sexuality.

## Expanding methods

In the 1920s, policewomen used the same methods developed to control abortion to regulate queer women and spaces.

In June 1926, a policewoman investigated Eve Addams' lesbian tearoom, a 'hangout—where ladies prefer each other', in Greenwich Village. Like many of the midwives, Addams too was a Polish Jewish immigrant.

A policewoman visited the tearoom undercover three times, before she arranged to attend a show with Addams. According to the policewoman, in the taxi to the theatre, Addams 'embraced and caressed her', kissing her 'so ardently in the taxi that several policemen became interested, and the policewoman had to wave her handkerchief as a signal not to interfere'.<sup>2</sup>

As a result of the policewoman's testimony, Addams was arrested and deported to Poland. Once more, policewomen jeopardised their reputation in ways their male counterparts did not, all the while extending surveillance of and criminalising other women's sexuality.



## TAKE HOME MESSAGE

Early policewomen have previously been understood as 'nurturing' social workers or 'municipal mothers'. My research shows their work was explicitly punitive and regulatory.

<sup>1</sup> Court of General Sessions People v. Pauline Papp (1913) and People v. Bertha Schmulensen (1917)

<sup>2</sup> Sullivan, Mary 'The Tea Room Case', *International Association of Women Police Bulletin* (Oct. 1926)