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Employment of Black and Hispanic Police Officers, 1983-1988: A Follow-up Study

by

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Police departments in the 50 largest cities in the United States made uneven progress in the employment of black and Hispanic officers between 1983 and 1988.

Nearly half (45 percent) of the big-city police departments made significant progress in the employment of black officers. Seventeen percent, however, reported a decline in the percentage of black officers. A similar pattern exists in the employment of Hispanic police officers. Forty-two percent of the departments reported significant increases in the percentage of Hispanic officers employed. Nearly 11 percent (10.6 percent) reported a decline, however, while 17.0 percent reported no change.

Affirmative action plans appear to play a significant role in police employment trends. Nearly two-thirds (63.8 percent) of the police departments reported operating under an affirmative action plan at some point during the last five years. Twenty-three of the affirmative action plans were court-ordered, and seven were voluntary. Nineteen of the affirmative action plans covered the employment of both black and Hispanic officers; 11 covered only the recruitment of black officers. No departments reported plans covering only Hispanic officers.

Methodology

These findings are the result of a five-year follow up to a similar 1983 study of racial minority employment conducted by the author. The study surveyed police departments in the 50 largest U.S. cities according to the 1980 Census of the Population. Forty-seven departments, or 94 percent of the total, responded to the survey. Cleveland, Ohio; San Antonio, Texas; and Honolulu, Hawaii, failed to respond.

The survey collected data on the total number of sworn officers, the number of black officers, and the number of Hispanic officers in each department. The survey did not collect data on the representation of racial minority officers at different ranks within each department.

For the 1983 study, the author created an index to measure the percentage of minorities employed relative to the percentage of minorities in the local population. For purposes of discussion, a department has achieved a theoretical ideal level of minority employment when the employed percentage equals the percentage of that minority group in the local population (yielding an index of 1.00).

The fact that nearly half of the big-city departments have been operating under court-ordered affirmative action plans indicates that employment of minorities remains a matter of considerable litigation and controversy.

Discussion

The 1988 survey also uses the 1980 census data on minority population in the 50 largest U.S. cities. The 1988 indices, therefore, should be viewed with some caution. In some cities the proportion of blacks and/or Hispanics may have changed significantly. The patterns of change are undoubtedly irregular across the country, due to local social and economic factors. The Census Bureau, however, has not published inter-censal data for racial groups at any level below the national level.

The 1988 data suggest guarded optimism with respect to racial minority employment in policing. Progress toward a theoretical ideal level of minority employment in many cities has been offset by lack of progress or an actual decline in other cities.

The cases of progress, however, are substantial and should not be ignored. In 1983, 3 departments had an Index of .75 for black officers; by 1988 there were 11 departments at this level. In 1983, 8 departments had an Index of .75 for Hispanic officers; by 1988 the total was 16. In four departments (Atlanta, Detroit, El Paso, and Miami), white officers constitute a minority in 1988.

The increase in minority officers has profound, although largely unexplored, implications for individual departments. It has potentially significant ramifications for the dynamics of the police subculture, the role of the local police union, and public perception of police departments. There are also other potentially significant, indirect effects on police policies in the community.

Minority Employment As An Issue In American Policing

The employment of minorities, particularly black officers, has been a volatile political issue for more than 25 years. The under-representation of black officers was identified as a serious problem by the President's Crime Commission in 1967 and the Kerner Commission in 1968. The fact that nearly half of the big-city departments have been operating under court-ordered affirmative action plans indicates that it remains a matter of considerable litigation and controversy.

Most police experts argue that under-representation aggravates tensions between the police and racial minority communities. In terms of actual police performance, some argue that minority officers are better able to relate to the problems of minority citizens. One commentator has even suggested that race could be used as a bona fide occupational qualification for employment in policing. Independent of performance, some experts maintain that under-representation hurts the image of the department in the eyes of the minority community. Still others argue that equal employment opportunity is required as a matter of law, irrespective of whether it results in improved policing.

It is entirely possible that some police departments have in fact recruited significant numbers of minority officers, only to lose them to other employers.

Increasing Minority Representation

The current data suggest that enormous progress has been made since the 1960s. They further indicate that a number of departments have made significant progress just in the past five years. Thirteen police departments in this study (28 percent) reported an increase of 50 percent or more in the representation of black officers between 1983 and 1988. Eleven departments (23 percent) reported an increase of 50 percent or more in the representation of Hispanic officers.

In some departments the increase was truly dramatic. The index for black officers increased 141.6 percent in Jacksonville, Florida; 108.1 percent in Buffalo, New York; 83.6 percent in Detroit, Michigan; 83.3 percent in Tulsa, Oklahoma; and 70 percent in Birmingham, Alabama. The index for Hispanic officers increased 231.2 percent in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; 200 percent in Indianapolis, Indiana; 192.3 percent in Cincinnati, Ohio; and 170.2 percent in Buffalo, New York.

Declining Minority Representation

Declines, too, were reported, and they are cause for concern. Several of the declines, however, occurred in departments that reported high levels of minority officers in 1983. Toledo, Ohio, for example, reported a 14.2 percent decline for black officers. Yet in 1983 the department exceeded the theoretical ideal level of black representation, and by 1988 it still had an index of 0.90. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, reported an 8.2 percent decline for Hispanic officers, but in 1988 still had an index of 1.00.

The lack of progress in Hispanic employment appears to be often the result of very low representation of Hispanics in the local community. All seven of the departments reporting no progress are in cities where Hispanics comprise two percent or less of the population.

The most interesting figure was the reported 16.9 percent decline for black officers in the Metropolitan Police Department of the District of Columbia. Washington is a particularly sensitive case, given the combination of a high minority population and the city's status as the nation's capital. It is possible that the decline is the result of black officers being recruited away by federal jobs offering higher pay and greater career opportunities. The lack of opportunity for meaningful career development has been cited as a serious problem in American police personnel administration.

It is entirely possible that some police departments have in fact recruited significant numbers of minority officers, only to lose them to other employers. It is also possible that loss of minority officers is due to covert institutional racism that, among other things, blocks career advancement. Further research is needed on this subject. There is little research on the extent to which officers of all races leave

Table 1. Employment of Black Police Officers in 50 Largest U.S. Cities, 1983-1988

City*	Officers		Percentage Black	Index †		Percentage Change	Affirmative Action Plan**
	Total	Black		1983	1988		
New York, NY	27,312	2,992	10.9	.40	.43	7.5	B
Chicago, IL	12,362	2,805	22.0	.51	.55	7.8	B
Los Angeles, CA	7,305	873	11.9	.55	.70	27.2	B
Philadelphia, PA	6,519	1,300	19.9	.44	.53	20.4	B
Houston, TX	4,323	595	13.7	.35	.50	42.8	B
Detroit, MI	4,944	2,806	56.7	.49	.90	83.6	B(V)
Dallas, TX	2,381	324	13.6	.28	.46	64.2	B(V)
San Diego, CA	1,704	114	6.6	.62	.74	19.3	-
Phoenix, AZ	1,888	69	3.6	.58	.75	29.3	-
Baltimore, MD	2,992	701	23.4	.32	.43	34.3	-
San Antonio, TX	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Indianapolis, IN	989	139	14.0	.60	.64	6.6	B
San Francisco, CA	1,846	158	8.5	.64	.67	4.6	B
Memphis, TN	1,264	371	29.3	.46	.62	34.7	B
Washington, DC	3,855	1,596	41.4	.71	.59	-16.9	-
Milwaukee, WI	1,974	225	11.3	.50	.49	-2.0	B
San Jose, CA	1,009	35	3.4	.46	.74	60.8	B(V)
Cleveland, OH	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Columbus, OH	1,370	195	14.2	.50	.64	28.0	B
Boston, MA	1,943	336	17.2	.59	.77	30.5	B
New Orleans, LA	1,347	445	33.0	.38	.60	57.8	B
Jacksonville, FL	1,031	153	14.8	.24	.58	141.6	B(V)
Seattle, WA	1,150	74	6.4	.43	.67	55.8	B(V)
Denver, CO	1,343	70	5.2	.49	.43	-12.2	B
Nashville, TN	1,062	122	11.4	.50	.49	-2.0	B
St. Louis, MO	1,529	357	23.3	.43	.51	18.6	B(V)
Kansas City, MO	1,165	156	13.3	.39	.49	25.6	-
El Paso, TX	682	13	1.9	.63	.59	-6.3	-
Atlanta, GA	1,365	771	56.4	.69	.85	23.1	-
Pittsburgh, PA	1,062	231	21.7	.60	.90	50.0	B
Oklahoma City, OK	682	28	4.1	.27	.28	3.7	-
Cincinnati, OH	890	130	14.6	.27	.43	59.2	B
Fort Worth, TX	970	93	9.5	.25	.42	68.0	-
Minneapolis, MN	684	25	3.6	.38	.47	23.6	-
Portland, OR	752	21	2.7	.36	.36	0	-
Honolulu, HI	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Long Beach, CA	662	23	3.4	.27	.30	11.1	-
Tulsa, OK	665	52	7.8	.36	.66	83.3	-
Buffalo, NY	1,002	174	17.3	.37	.77	108.1	B
Toledo, OH	737	115	15.6	1.05	.90	-14.2	B(V)
Miami, FL	1,033	180	17.4	.69	.69	0	B(V)
Austin, TX	771	80	10.3	.57	.84	47.3	-
Oakland, CA	593	147	24.7	.49	.53	8.1	-
Albuquerque, NM	696	18	2.5	.96	1.00	4.1	-
Tucson, AZ	728	21	2.8	.81	.76	-6.1	B(V)
Newark, NJ	1,064	296	27.8	.41	.48	17.0	-
Charlotte, NC	686	152	22.1	.72	.71	-1.3	B
Omaha, NE	617	66	10.6	.69	.88	27.5	B
Louisville, KY	640	98	15.3	.36	.54	50.0	B
Birmingham, AL	660	188	28.4	.30	.51	70.0	B

*Cities are ranked by population according to the 1980 Census of the Population.

† The index measures percentage of minority employees compared to percentage of that minority group in the local population.

**B = Affirmative action plan for blacks.

V = Voluntary plan. All others court-ordered.

Table 2. Employment of Hispanic Police Officers in the 50 Largest U.S. Cities, 1983-1988

City*	Officers		Percentage Hispanic	Index †		Percentage Change	Affirmative Action Plan**
	Total	Hispanic		1983	1988		
New York, NY	27,312	2,850	10.4	.36	.52	44.4	H
Chicago, IL	12,362	672	5.4	.24	.39	62.5	H
Los Angeles, CA	7,305	1,282	17.5	.49	.64	30.6	H
Philadelphia, PA	6,519	135	2.0	.16	.53	231.2	H
Houston, TX	4,323	479	11.0	.49	.63	28.5	H
Detroit, MI	4,944	63	1.2	.29	.50	72.4	H(V)
Dallas, TX	2,381	151	6.3	.37	.51	37.8	H(V)
San Diego, CA	1,704	174	10.2	.52	.68	30.7	-
Phoenix, AZ	1,888	189	10.0	.63	.67	6.3	-
Baltimore, MD	2,992	13	0.4	.30	.40	33.3	-
San Antonio, TX	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Indianapolis, IN	989	3	0.3	.11	.33	200.0	-
San Francisco, CA	1,846	184	9.9	.66	.80	21.2	H
Memphis, TN	1,264	0	0	0	0	0	-
Washington, DC	3,855	106	2.7	.36	.96	166.6	-
Milwaukee, WI	1,974	82	4.1	1.09	1.00	-8.2	H
San Jose, CA	1,009	178	17.6	.78	.79	1.2	H(V)
Cleveland, OH	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Columbus, OH	1,370	0	0	0	0	0	-
Boston, MA	1,943	63	3.2	.33	.50	51.5	-
New Orleans, LA	1,347	20	1.4	.56	.41	-26.7	H
Jacksonville, FL	1,031	10	0.9	.38	.50	31.5	H(V)
Seattle, WA	1,150	23	2.0	.65	.77	18.4	H(V)
Denver, CO	1,343	209	15.5	.69	.82	18.8	H
Nashville, TN	1,062	5	0.4	.38	.50	31.5	-
St. Louis, MO	1,529	0	0	0	0	0	-
Kansas City, MO	1,165	26	2.2	.45	.67	48.8	-
El Paso, TX	682	386	56.4	.91	.90	-1.0	-
Atlanta, GA	1,365	20	1.4	.43	1.00	132.5	-
Pittsburgh, PA	1,062	0	0	.38	0	-100.0	-
Oklahoma City, OK	682	6	0.8	.25	.29	16.0	-
Cincinnati, OH	890	3	0.3	.13	.38	192.3	-
Fort Worth, TX	970	73	7.5	.52	.60	15.3	-
Minneapolis, MN	684	15	2.1	.85	1.62	90.5	-
Portland, OR	752	10	1.3	.62	.62	0	-
Honolulu, HI	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Long Beach, CA	662	58	8.7	.39	.62	58.9	-
Tulsa, OK	665	3	0.4	.29	.24	-17.2	-
Buffalo, NY	1,002	55	5.4	.74	2.00	170.2	H
Toledo, OH	737	28	3.7	1.20	1.23	2.5	H(V)
Miami, FL	1,033	439	42.4	.70	.76	8.5	H(V)
Austin, TX	771	112	14.5	.64	.78	21.8	-
Oakland, CA	593	57	9.6	.96	1.00	4.1	-
Albuquerque, NM	696	250	35.9	.97	1.06	9.2	-
Tucson, AZ	728	125	17.1	.69	.69	0	H(V)
Newark, NJ	1,064	71	6.6	.26	.35	34.6	-
Charlotte, NC	686	0	0	0	0	0	-
Omaha, NE	617	18	2.9	.91	1.26	38.4	-
Louisville, KY	640	1	0.1	.14	.14	0	-
Birmingham, AL	660	0	0	0	0	0	-

*Cities are ranked by population according to the 1980 Census of the Population.

† The index measures percentage of minority employees compared to percentage of that minority group in the local population.

**H = Affirmative action plan for Hispanics.

V = Voluntary plan. All others court-ordered.

It should be noted that a department can still recruit new officers even while shrinking in size. There is a steady flow of vacancies due to retirements, resignations and dismissals.

careers in policing, much less *why* they do so, and some of the most detailed data are now extremely dated.¹¹ We do not know, for example, if departments are losing their best young officers or their worst.

It may not necessarily be cause for alarm if black police officers are being lured away by more attractive alternatives. It might mean that jobs in policing function as an avenue of upward mobility for black individuals. Working with a police agency may allow an individual to gain the experience and self-confidence necessary for further upward mobility, particularly if the individual has been promoted to a supervisory rank. While this process poses a considerable burden on particular police departments, it may be beneficial from a broader societal perspective.

Financial Constraints

The financial condition of a city is an important factor in minority recruitment. It is evident that increasing the percentage of minorities is extremely difficult when the department is not recruiting at all. In 1983 nearly half of all police departments surveyed had experienced recent budget cuts. A total of 101 (17.2 percent of those reporting) had laid off officers, and 378 were not presently filling vacancies because of budget constraints.¹² In some departments, because of the seniority system, discharges have wiped out recent gains in the recruitment of both racial minorities and women.

The financial conditions of the 50 largest U.S. cities vary considerably. Several police departments have declined in size as a result of declining populations and eroding tax bases. Others, particularly in the Sun Belt, have grown considerably in the past five years. But it should be noted that a department can still recruit new officers even while shrinking in size. There is a steady flow of vacancies due to retirements, resignations and dismissals. A shrinking department can recruit new officers but fill only some of the vacancies.

It is in this context that the performance of the New York City Police Department (NYCPD) appears as a serious disappointment. Unlike most departments, it has experienced tremendous growth following severe cutbacks in the 1970s. It is one of only six police departments in the entire country that employ more than 4,000 officers. Between 1983 and 1988, the NYCPD grew by 17.7 percent, adding nearly 4,000 officers. Because of retirements and other departures, the total number of recruits exceeded that number. The index for black officers increased by 7.5 percent during that time, leaving the department with an index of only 0.43.

Among the 30 largest U.S. cities in 1988, New York is tied with two other departments (Baltimore and Denver) for the lowest index for black officers. The NYCPD apparently failed to take advantage of massive recruiting to significantly increase the percentage of black officers. This failure is all the more significant considering that the department has been embroiled in serious racial controversies during the same period.

What is the impact of affirmative action programs? Do they succeed in achieving their objectives?

Other police departments have made meaningful progress in minority employment despite the fact that they shrank in size. In Philadelphia, the index for black officers rose by 20.4 percent and by 231.2 percent for Hispanic officers, even though the department as a whole shrank by 10 percent. Baltimore managed to increase the representation of both black and Hispanic officers despite the fact that its department shrank slightly.

Still other large departments used the opportunity presented by growth to improve their minority employment record. The Detroit police department, also recovering from an earlier period of financial constraint, grew by 22.6 percent. The index for black officers increased by 83.6 percent and for Hispanic officers by 72.4 percent. Houston's department grew by 19.1 percent and increased its index for black officers by 42.8 percent and for Hispanic officers by 28.5 percent.

The current data suggest a number of important issues for further research.

Conclusions: Research Needs

1. What are the factors associated with progress, or lack of progress, in minority employment? Is the critical factor leadership in city government (for example, by the mayor's office) and/or by the chief executive in the police department? What is the impact of affirmative action programs? Do they succeed in achieving their objectives? If so, do they achieve them without undesirable costs?
2. What is the extent of personnel turnover for officers of all races? Why do officers leave? Do police departments lose their best or their worst? Is there evidence of institutional racism that encourages racial minority officers to leave at higher rates than whites?
3. What are the patterns of promotion for racial minority officers? Is progress in overall employment matched by equal employment opportunity in promotions? How do patterns in promotions affect retention?
4. What is the impact of minority employment on public perceptions and police-community relations? Do citizens have an accurate picture of employment patterns? Does it make any difference in their attitudes toward the police department?
5. What is the impact of minority employment on police practices? Does a significant change in the racial composition of the department alter official police policy? Does it have any significant effect on the informal police subculture and, in turn, affect police performance?

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Endnotes

1. Samuel Walker. "Employment of Black and Hispanic Police Officers." Center for Applied Urban Research, University of Nebraska at Omaha, *Review of Applied Urban Research XI* (October 1983).
2. Surveys of police personnel practices generally aggregate the data, making it impossible to specify employment patterns in individual departments. See International City Management Association, "Police Personnel Practices," *Baseline Data Report 15* (January 1983): 3-4.
3. For a similar approach, see Ellen Hochstedler, "Impediments to Hiring Minorities in Public Police Agencies," *Journal of Police Science and Administration* 12 (1984, No. 2): 227-240.
4. These issues are discussed in Samuel Walker, "Racial Minority and Female Employment in Policing: The Implications of Glacial Change," *Crime and Delinquency* 31 (October 1985): 555-572.
5. U.S. President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, *The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society*, New York: Avon Books, 1968: 262. Also, U.S. Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, New York: Bantam Books, 1968: 315-317.
6. See Scott Decker and Russell Smith, "Police Minority Recruitment: A Note on its Effectiveness in Improving Black Evaluations of the Police," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 8 (1980, No. 6): 387-394. Also, James B. Jacobs and Jay Cohen, "The Impact of Racial Integration on the Police," *Journal of Police Science and Administration* 6 (June 1978): 166-183. For a discussion of reform assumptions, see Samuel Walker, "Paths to Police Reform: A Review of Thirty Years of Police Reform," in Dennis Jay Kenney, Ed., *Police and Policing*, New York: Praeger, forthcoming. For a sensible discussion, see Herman Goldstein, *Policing a Free Society* Cambridge: Ballinger, 1977: 269-271, 329.
7. Note, "Race as an Employment Qualification to Meet Police Department Operational Needs," *New York University Law Review* 54 (May 1979): 413-445.
8. See #4.
9. This is a speculative point based on informal conversations with other experts.
10. Generally, see Herman Goldstein, *Policing a Free Society*, Chapter 10; and Dorothy Guyot, "Bending Granite: Attempts to Change the Rank Structure of American Police Departments," *Journal of Police Science and Administration* 7 (1977, No. 3): 253-284.
11. Bernard Cohen, and Jan M. Chaiken. *Police Background Characteristics and Performance*. Lexington: Lexington Books, 1973. This study involved a cohort of 1957 New York City police recruits and is, therefore, seriously dated.
12. International City Management Association. "Police Personnel Practices." *Baseline Data Report 15* (January 1983): 3-4.
13. Samuel Walker. "Employment of Black and Hispanic Police Officers." Also Dorothy Guyot and Lois Dedes, "Layoffs," *Journal of Police Science and Administration* 10 (December 1982): 435-451.

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