

Minority Hiring Challenging NYPD

FORWARD

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NEW YORK — Dressed in boxy banker's gray, the summer sun splotching his fine Irish pallor, Detective Timothy Muldoon doesn't exactly blend into the seedy street scene in Manhattan's Washington Heights. But the thirty-something Bronx-born investigator doesn't seem to be at a loss for that. One of the top performers in the 34th Precinct's detective bureau, he clears more homicide cases in what is the city's most murder-ridden precinct than many with twice his five-years' experience.

Detective Muldoon credits his degree in sociology, several night-school semesters of Spanish and wide travels in the Third World for helping him — a white officer — work within the predominantly Latino world of the Heights. But finally, he says, it is a professional approach, as well as a sixth sense for the neighborhood's drug culture, that serves him the best.

Community Policing

"My philosophy is if you aren't from the hood you shouldn't pretend to be," Detective Muldoon explains, sitting in front of a two-way mirror in the detective office's witness interrogation room at the 34th. "But you know, I've been all over the world, and I tell you, people aren't all that much different when it really comes down to it. Cultural barriers are there, for sure, but if you really want

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to, you can relate to anyone."

It has become an article of faith in certain quarters that the city's rapidly changing racial and ethnic composition demands that the police department make an effort to broaden its racial and ethnic make-up too. Diversity, its proponents say, is critical to the concept of community policing, a key to building relationships of trust between the police and the many different ethnic and racial communities they serve. The issue is one of economic fairness, too, since police careers offer a measure of upward mobility that no group should be denied.

But the campaign to broaden diversity in the New York Police Department is very much driven by the presumption that a lack of racial and ethnic balance automatically makes the police a less effective instrument. Officers like Detective Muldoon, however, are reminders of the importance that professionalism and personal drive, rather than racial or ethnic identity, play in everyday police work. Increased diversity may help quiet political activists who say the majority white department has grown increasingly culturally alienated from the city's majority black and Latino population. But if diversity means lowering standards, some fear, and if it fails to address minority tensions, it is likely to backfire.

In a city where blacks account for 25% of the population and Latinos 24%, the 29,000-member New York Police Department is 74% white, 11.5% black and 14% Latino. The imbalance makes New York dead last in terms of proportional minority representation, according to a recent survey by the University of Nebraska of 50 major police departments around the country. Many critics of the department say the imbalance has set the stage for increasingly bitter minority relations. It is often cited by the media when cases of alleged police brutality crop up, particularly when a black or Latino is injured or killed in confrontations with police, such as when Jose "Kiko" Garcia died after pulling a gun on Officer Michael O'Keefe last

summer in Washington Heights.

In many of these cases, such as Garcia's, investigations have found charges of police misconduct false. Nevertheless, the assumption that increased diversity will make instances of police brutality less likely — an assumption unsupported by any real research — has put tremendous pressure on the department to bolster its minority representation. Some authorities concede they think the issue of representation is more a matter of politics than sub-

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stance. "But at the end of the day if there is a perception that a force dominated by whites can't serve minority communities then it is a problem," says Michael Smith, of the Vera Institute of Justice.

Minority Recruitment

Upon becoming police commissioner last October, Commissioner Raymond Kelly made minority recruitment a priority, as the department plans to fill some 11,000 spots over the next four years. Mr. Kelly has told the press he does not buy into the charges of police racism, but he does believe racial imbalance in a department serving an increasingly minority city does make that force "less dynamic." Without more minority officers, there will be more tension between the police and the community, he says. "Tensions will lead to hostilities and that will lead to more cries of racism in the department," he says.

Mr. Kelly's first step was to win an extension of the application deadline for taking the June 26 hiring exam, pushing it back six months from October to April. He then increased the number of recruiters from 16 to 109, of whom 86 are black or Latino. These recruiters have been sent into black churches around the city and onto military bases all over the country where qualified minority applicants might be found. This boosted the applicant pool from 19,000 to 57,000, of whom nearly half are minorities.

Mr. Kelly was also able to win approval of a five-point bonus on the 100-point exam for city residents, a measure clearly calculated to help more minorities pass than before. Most important, he has said he will initiate a review of the psychological screening procedures involved in the testing process, which now rejects blacks and Latinos at a much higher rate than whites.

Mr. Kelly's efforts have won high praise. Basil Wilson, provost at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, says expanding the number of minority recruits will enhance the department's "effectiveness and legitimacy" and will help more minorities into a career which he calls "a gateway to the middle class." James Fyfe, a former NYPD patrolman and now a professor of criminal justice at Temple University says it will force the largely white rank-and-file to confront the problem of minority stereotyping that poisons relations with the community and between policemen

of different races. "An integrated force thinks less in terms of 'us and them,'" says Mr. Fyfe.

Mr. Kelly and his public affairs officers insist they won't apply racial handicapping or quotas to boost the minority pass rate. An applicant pool of 57,000 ensures that they will find enough qualified minority officers to achieve appropriate racial balance in the coming years, making those controversial remedies unnecessary.

But the quality of new hires remains at risk. For years, the effort to increase minority representation has forced the department to devise ever-easier exams and to set absurdly low scores for passing. In the 1940s

and 1950s, the city passed only 4% to 5% of those taking the written exam.

By 1991, the test was curved so that 80% got on the hiring list.

According to Judith Piesco, a former city Department of Personnel

testing official, this has allowed "functional illiterates" to pass. Further undermining the rigor of the hiring process are a number of bonuses: five points for residents, another five for military veterans and still another five for those veterans who can claim "disabled" status, which is relatively easy to do.

'Jumping' the Numbers

The pressure that black activists like Al Sharpton have put on officials to change the psychological screening process might also depress standards. The psychological exam provides a vital function in screening out people with inappropriate dispositions and checkered mental health backgrounds. But given the political climate, it will be difficult for the police department to resist temptations to bend the standards for psychological fitness for minorities. And if the overall numbers don't improve, the threat of court actions, which have forced the department to use quotas in the promotion process on both the sergeants' and lieutenants' level in recent years, could intimidate the city into making racial adjustments.

"If they want to jump the numbers they will find a way to do it," says Louis Weiser, a former New York Police Department minority recruitment consultant and current head of the Council of Jewish Organizations in Civil Service. "The city desperately wants to avoid court actions."

Supporters of the diversity effort say that test scores are not as important as the broader dividends earned when minority communities see

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themselves reflected in the face of the police department. But while diversity may help police identify better with some communities, opponents say the lowered standards it may entail could hurt the force's ability to perform its primary mission as a deterrent to crime. The work of cops with deficient skills in reading, writing or critical thinking, for example, tends to be undependable in court, as many prosecutors who have been burdened with faulty arrest and investigation reports can attest.

Friction Fueled

Besides the problem of lowered standards, skeptics also point out that having more minority officers on the street might not automatically smooth over police-community frictions. In Washington Heights, for example, relations between Dominican residents and non-Dominican Hispanic cops assigned there to boost Latino representation have not always been good. And very often, say cops, Dominican drug dealers take the efforts of Dominican-born cops to shut them down as a personal affront. "It's a small place, the Dominican Republic," notes one patrolman. "The dealers tell the officers they know where their families live. The intimidation is real."

Skeptics also note that the problems fueling frictions between police and minorities are far more involved than a simple matter of achieving racial balance in blue. The problems really plaguing the 34th Precinct, such as "the extraordinary reach of the drug culture, the

violence of the drug trade and the problem of illegal immigration," says Robert Jackal, a sociologist from Williams College studying police-community dynamics in the area, will not be solved by making the police force more diverse or multicultural. "The police are getting blamed for those other problems because they are symbols of institutional authority in society at large. They are an easy focal point for problems that have to be addressed in other ways."

At least one officer, who requested anonymity, finds it all a bit disconcerting. "All this diversity stuff can start to sound like a cult after a while. Nobody ever questions it. I just wish the brass downtown would think twice about what they are doing."

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