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The Corrupt Influence of Police Diversity Hiring

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The rash of crooked police officers being indicted all across New York City is proof of the need for broad changes in the department's institutional culture, say officials with the Mollen Commission, New York's mayoral panel examining police corruption.

Yet the chorus of liberal voices championing increased diversity as a solution has little evidence to back up its case. True enough, most bad cops have been white, but a disproportionate number of cops indicted in the latest corruption wave in New York have been minority officers hired in recent years to make the city's force more reflective of its demographics. In fact, if New York's experience proves similar to that of Washington and Miami, investigators will discover that lowered testing standards and relaxed background checks pursued for racial and ethnic proportionalism are part of the problem, not the solution.

Discussing the link between diversity efforts and corruption is a politically touchy issue, and it is right to be wary of unfair generalizations that hark back to nativist slurs against "inherently criminal" immigrant groups, like the Irish, said to be unfit for police service. The problem is not, of course, diversity per se, or the qualifications of any particular group, but the standard-lowering procedures by which diversity is often achieved -- a problem police officials should take note of but up to now have not.

The most egregious case of corruption in New York involves 12 cops arrested at once in Harlem's 30th Precinct. These officers are accused of shaking down drug dealers for more than \$400,000 in cash and drugs, of intimidating some witnesses and assaulting others, of tampering with

evidence, and of selling their shields to protect some dealers and to harass their rivals.

Although news reports did not identify police officers in the 30th by race and ethnicity, photographs and names of the arrested officers splashed across the front pages of newspapers indicated that eight of the 12 were Latino, which the department confirms. One, Patrolman Alfonso Compres, a community-affairs officer known on the street as the brutal "Abusador," was from San Francisco de Macoris, the Dominican Republic's notorious breeding ground for foot soldiers in Upper Manhattan's drug trade.

Facing accusations of cultural alienation and brutality, the 74%-white NYPD has lowered hiring standards and resorted to preferential policies like quotas and residency bonus points on qualifying exams to boost the number of blacks and Latinos. These steps are a clear repudiation of Progressive Era civil service systems that placed merit over concerns for race and ethnicity, but are necessary for racial balance, say today's progressives.

Theories of police diversity were very much in evidence in the 30th Precinct, where, NYPD Chief of Personnel Michael Julian confirms, the race and ethnicity of the cops assigned there were carefully matched to the proportions of the predominantly black and Latino population. Authorities have not yet finished sifting through the files of the cops in the "Dirty 30" or any of the other precincts where crooked cops have been found. But what they have found raises troubling questions, worth pursuing further, about the unintended consequences of the department's diversity procedures.

According to officials, many of the indicted officers in the 30th had rock-bottom test scores on hiring exams. Investigators have also found that several of the officers were given approval by background inspectors even though they resided in buildings that were notorious drug locations and had relatives with multiple felony drug convictions, indicating they may have been immersed in the culture of narcotics before they came on the job, officials say.

Of course, such lapses in background investigations are hard to blame on diversity alone. But in other recent corruption cases the politics of diversity were clearly at fault.

In the case of William Folborg, a black Brooklyn detective arrested for bilking a widow out of \$75,000 in a diamond-purchasing scheme, background investigators red-flagged two prior arrests that the detective

had as a teenager for armed robbery. But in 1983, when Mr. Folborg appealed to the Candidate Review Board, a panel instituted to guard against racial discrimination in the hiring process, he was passed. A member of the panel explained that since he hadn't actually used the gun, he should be given a chance. In another case, Eric Mercer, a black candidate who had been arrested for burglary and for once randomly firing a gun in the street, was allowed on the job after a diversity manager in the police department overruled the Applicant Processing Division, which had rejected him.

The Mollen Commission is looking at corruption in terms of the poor state of sergeantry in the affected precincts, which it says set the stage for rank-and-file corruption. Many sergeants, Mollen investigators have told the press, should never have been promoted, or even hired to begin with. But the problem of incompetent sergeants can't be discussed without accounting for racial preferences, which were instituted after minorities complained of cultural bias in promotion exams in the 1980s, or for the way lowered standards of recruiting patrolmen make it generally harder to promote officers of ability and character to sergeant.

The experiences of other cities show that flawed diversity efforts have made the problem of police corruption worse. In Washington, the push to make the police force more representative has led to residency requirements, severely weakened hiring exams and flagrant racial favoritism in assignment and promotion. It has also led to demoralization and, according to the office of the U.S. attorney there, to corruption as well. In 1993, 113 Washington officers, most of them black, stood indicted of serious felonies, ranging from drug dealing to murder. (In the FBI's special District public corruption squad, policing the police is now a growth industry.)

Among those indicted were 12 black officers arrested last December in a federal sting operation for making deals to use their badges to protect undercover FBI agents posing as drug kingpins. (Nine of the 12 have already pleaded guilty to felonies.) Taped conversations revealed that the cops boasted to the agents of their "credentials" for the job -- with many of them admitting to having worked for drug gangs before becoming police officers.

Likewise Miami, where city commissioners declared that 80% of new hires be minority and that all recruits be residents. By the late 1980s, scores of police officers -- 10% of the force -- had either been accused or convicted of serious felonies. Subsequent investigations revealed that many of them

were minorities with felony backgrounds that officials knew about but ignored in the rush to boost the numbers.

There is, of course, a need to create some level of diversity on police forces. But it would be better if diversity efforts were driven by a desire to give working-class minorities the upward mobility that police careers have offered other groups, instead of the demagogic presumption that a force lacking proportionate numbers of minorities is necessarily racist. It would also be better if these diversity efforts maintained rather than weakened the integrity of the police force. Cities as a whole suffer from bad police diversity policies, but it is crime-ridden minority communities in them that suffer the most.

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(See related letter: "Letters to the Editor: Room at the Trough" -- WSJ July 5, 1994)

(See related letter: "Letters to the Editor: D.C. Police: In Diversity Lies Our True Strength" -- WSJ July 26, 1994)