

States of the Union

RECRUITING POLICE IN THE GHETTO

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



FOLLOWING the epidemic of ghetto riots during the '60s, many big-city police departments launched elaborate and expensive "minority recruitment campaigns" to attract more black and Spanish-speaking applicants. These drives nearly always began on a note of optimism, sustained by the characteristically American belief that if the "product"—i.e., a police career—were properly "sold," members of minority groups would rush to buy it. Advertising in newspapers and on television thus became a primary instrument of recruitment. In

This is the second of three articles based on a study for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights by Richard and Diane Margolis.

addition, "recruitmobiles" equipped with loudspeakers were sent rolling through the ghetto; new enlistment offices were opened within minority neighborhoods; black policemen were taken off their regular beats and transferred to "Personnel"; and special brochures, displaying pictures of black policemen, were printed and distributed.

These programs have been a mixed blessing. On the one hand, they have produced moderate gains in the number of black and Chicano policemen throughout the nation; on the other, they have disillusioned thousands of minority members who answered ads but did not survive the inevitable civil service obstacle course of written tests, interviews and background investigations. In short, many were called but few were chosen.

The upshot, as we shall see, has been considerable frustration on both sides. Black leaders are inclined to write off minority recruiting efforts as empty promises designed to prevent riots; police officials, meanwhile, tend to view blacks as either too hostile or too cynical to make effective policemen. Nevertheless, the campaigns have done more good than harm, especially in cities like Washington, where officials seem genuinely committed to bringing about the old-fashioned ideal of racial integration. What follows is an examination of police minority hiring programs in three cities across the country—Washington, Miami and Denver.

Washington

"We believe it can be done, and we have begun to do it."

—JAMES MURRAY, HEAD OF THE POLICE PERSONNEL DIVISION.

Washington's 4,100-man police department is 30 per cent black and 70 per cent white—exactly the opposite of the city's population. But during this year the proportion of Negroes has steadily increased, until now more blacks than whites are joining the force, reversing 1970's recruiting ratio of 43 per cent black to 57 per cent white. The capital has admittedly had a lot of things going for it:

- A major expansion requiring the addition of 1,000 new officers in a single year.
- A wide-ranging recruiting staff of 99 men and women.
- A sufficient number of Negroes on the force to assure new black prospects they would not be alone.
- A sizable black middle class in the city from which to draw.
- Convenient access to special Federal funds for recruitment purposes.

Yet the real key to Washington's relative success is its commitment to a continuing program aimed at attracting minority-group police candidates, instead of a temporary, one-shot crusade. This not only allows greater flexibility in testing new techniques, but more significantly, it has made possible the building of bases of support within the black community. In fact, Washington personnel officials are convinced that the minority neighborhood should do its own recruiting in cooperation with the police department. Accordingly, they have helped a coalition of neighborhood organizations in the capital's Adams-Morgan section obtain U.S. Labor Department funds for the purpose of seeking out black policemen in their area.

Besides focusing on black community organizations in the District, police officials have sent recruiters into the nation's urban centers with

encouraging results. Moreover, for reasons no one completely understands, out-of-town Negro prospects pass the written test more frequently than do Washington blacks. In the first three-and-a-half months of 1970, for example, the difference was 57 per cent to 37.

As the figures indicate, though, the written test continues to be a major hurdle to minority recruitment. And this becomes especially apparent when the scores of local whites and blacks are contrasted. In the case of all applicants tested in recruitmobiles from July 1968 through June 1969, 85 per cent of the whites passed, as opposed to 47 per cent of the blacks.

Clearly, if such experiments as Adams-Morgan are to succeed, and if blacks are to have any confidence in the proceedings, the written requirements will have to be revised. District Civil Service Commission officials who administer the tests say they are doing just that. They are rather vague in describing the revisions, however, and it remains to be seen whether the new tests will improve the chances of blacks.

Miami

"We're suffering from a kind of social hangover."

—A BLACK POLICEMAN.

The hangover in the Miami Police Department comes from years of segregation. It was not until 1963 that the department swore off—abolishing its all-black precinct and attempting to integrate its 65 black policemen. Before then no Negro had been allowed to attend the police training academy, and blacks were given the rank of "patrolman"—one notch below the lowest white rank of "officer." To this day the policemen maintain separate Benevolent Associations, but opportunities for black policemen have improved; there are now four black sergeants and two black lieutenants on the force.

Like so many other cities, Miami

got into minority police recruitment in response to ghetto violence. Following the disturbances that marred the August 1968 Republican National Convention, it launched "Operation Badge," a sophisticated do-or-die effort that relied heavily on posters, brochures, newspaper advertising, and canvassing in the ghetto.

The recruitmobiles—bearing the message, "STOP! LET'S TALK!"—were also used as complaint centers, giving ghetto residents an opportunity to cite instances of harassment or other kinds of humiliation at the hands of policemen. To further inspire ghetto confidence in the department, while the complainant waited, an officer with a telephone in the mobile unit began checking out his grievance.

"There was a period after the riot," notes a city hall official, "when cops wouldn't dare make an arrest in certain parts of the ghetto. The black community and the police were at swords' points." Everyone agrees that the climate has improved, and charges of police brutality have dropped sharply. "Operation Badge shifted the reaction," the official says. "It drew off the poison."

It attracted quite a few black police applicants, too: an average of 12 a week for the first nine months of the campaign. Yet the same period saw only nine of them make it into the department. Today, about 70 out of 700 policemen are black and perhaps another 30 are Cuban—in other words, roughly 14 per cent of the force consists of minority-group members, compared to 45 per cent of the city's population. There is little prospect of a change in this ratio, for black and Cuban applications are falling off markedly, in large measure because the department's sincerity is suspect. "They came in here and beat the drum for Negro recruits," a black journalist remarked, "and when the guys responded they were kicked in the teeth." Unlike Washington, Miami has not persuaded its minority citi-

zens that it is genuinely committed to their integration in the police department.

Denver

"We're doing everything we possibly can do."

—A POLICE PERSONNEL OFFICER.

In the past two years Denver businessmen and media have contributed more than \$250,000 in time and talent to help the police department recruit more Negroes and Mexican-Americans. The results have been either dramatically successful or plainly disastrous, depending upon whom one talks to.

The figures are clear enough: In 1967 the department had approximately 20 Negroes and 20 Mexican-Americans; today it has 40 of each, out of a total force of 1,007. Minority representation has obviously doubled, but blacks and Chicanos comprise only 8 per cent of the force in a city where they constitute 21 per cent of the population.

What strikes one first about Denver's recruitment program is its high technical level. The ads for television, radio and the local newspapers have been slickly professional. No one knows, though, whether they appeal to the right people, nor has anyone involved in preparing the campaign seriously consulted with representatives of the black and Spanish-speaking communities.


Yet ghetto resentment of the police is far too deep and widespread to be overcome by smooth TV commercials. Even some of Denver's black policemen have been beaten up in the ghetto, and others have requested assignments far from their old neighborhoods. Indeed, the schism between the police force and the ghetto community appears to be widening. "There's cop brutality every day down here," according to a moderate Mexican-American spokesman. "The kids hate the cops. How can you expect a kid to be a policeman when all he's ever

seen a policeman do is bust somebody's head open?"

Such accusations seem to puzzle the police. "We never used to have any trouble with our minorities," says Chief George Seaton. "It's the few militants who stir things up." His viewpoint, identical to that of police officials in other parts of the Southwest, can be summarized as follows: Since militant leaders do not represent the rank-and-file for whom they claim to speak, there is no truth to their repeated charges of police brutality.

In the face of daily ghetto experience, these denials do nothing to strengthen the credibility of the minority recruitment program among blacks and browns. The surprising thing is that many minority members have actually responded to the advertisements and announced their intention to become policemen. Now what needs to be found is a way to accept even half of them. For only about one-third of Denver's minority-group prospects pass the written test, as compared to three-fourths of the white applicants. Many blacks and Chicanos are also eliminated by the background investigations—for such matters as bad debts, marital problems, or criminal records.

If the experiences of Washington, Miami and Denver tell us anything, it is that the problems associated with police minority hiring practices are less promotional than institutional. Police departments and ghetto communities have endured a long history of mutual distrust and hostility, and this history will not be expunged by brochures and TV commercials. What we need are not new recruitment "pitches" but new recruitment policies. Moreover, the relative success of Washington's recruitment efforts is in part attributable to the involvement of ghetto residents, which suggests that the new policies will have to be shaped as much by minority communities as by police departments. The final article in this series will explore and recommend a number of new approaches.



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