

## **Few minority police supervisors Recruiting and promoting are lagging in state's largest cities**

By Brian R. Ballou, Globe Staff | October 31, 2007

In Brockton, a city dotted with ethnic restaurants, neighborhoods where Cape Verdean Creole or Spanish is widely spoken, and where blacks constitute roughly one-third of the population, there are no minority police supervisors. And there probably will not be one any time soon, according to the chief.

The numbers are no better in Lynn and Quincy. In Worcester, police have just three minority supervisors on a department with 462 officers.

In fact, in the largest cities across Massachusetts, minority supervisors are significantly underrepresented, according to a Globe review.

The Boston Police Department, in which 20 percent of the top supervisors are minorities, has been most successful in recruiting and advancing minority officers, but still falls well short of the overall makeup of the population, which was 51 percent minority in 2000, when the latest census was taken.

If Boston is removed from the mix, the numbers are far more dismal. The state's other nine most populous cities boast a total of only 25 minorities among the 519 officers with a rank of sergeant or above, according to the Globe's figures.

"It's deplorable that the numbers are so low," said Angela Williams-Mitchell, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of Minority Law Enforcement Officers, based in Dorchester. "Unless these departments have managers in place who are serious about diversity, nothing will change."

Several police chiefs pinpointed the promotional exam, which was developed by the state, as the crux of the problem - a belief shared by Williams-Mitchell's association and several minority officers from Lawrence and Methuen, who recently filed a lawsuit contending that the exam discriminates against minority groups and has prevented their advancement.

"It's really a . . . stumbling block," said Brockton's police chief, William K. Conlon. "In the history of the department, I'm aware of only two minority officers, a Cape Verdean sergeant and a black lieutenant. Beyond that, we've never had another minority or a female supervisor. It's pretty disheartening. We've tried, but the civil service exam is what it is and everyone takes the same exam. I'd push for a study group, but I can't do that too much because then it looks like I'm discriminating against other groups."

In the last round of testing in Brockton, a Hispanic patrol officer recorded the highest score among minorities, finishing 12th, Conlon said. "The chances that a number twelve would get a promotion in the current cycle is virtually nil," Conlon said. The next testing will be in 2009.

Why the promotional exam has become such a stumbling block for minorities is unclear. In their lawsuit, the officers and their lawyers said the multiple-choice exam gives only a very limited view of someone's leadership skills. Williams-Mitchell said the cards are stacked against many

minority patrol officers who hail from the inner city because they may not receive the same level of education as candidates who come from suburban school systems.

"The test-taking and study skills aren't there, because they weren't taught those things in school," she said.

The exam tests knowledge of numerous topics, including crime scene investigation, community policing, and supervision of police personnel, based on a list of books recommended to the officers. Departments base promotions mainly on the test scores, but sometimes consider other factors such as years on the force, experience, training, and education.

The Globe reviewed, in order of population, Boston, Worcester, Springfield, Lowell, Cambridge, Brockton, New Bedford, Fall River, Lynn, and Quincy. All but two had populations that were at least a quarter minority as of 2000. The police departments of those cities, with the exception of Boston, Springfield, and Lowell, must abide by a 1970s federal consent decree that requires one in every three candidates considered for a department opening to be a minority. But the decree does not address supervisors.

According to the Globe review, the overall makeup of the police departments more closely reflects the diversity of the communities, although none match it, while the hierarchy remains overwhelmingly white.

"It is important to have minority representation on a higher level because that's where the decision-making about strategy occurs," said James Alan Fox, a professor of criminal justice at Northeastern University. "The police departments should make sure on the management side that they are sensitive to the issues of race, because that has a lot of impact when it comes to policing."

Conlon said that he would like to have more minorities in supervisory positions, but that they aren't scoring high enough on the promotional exam for consideration. In May, the state agreed to settle a class-action lawsuit, brought by four black firefighter applicants, alleging that civil service exams from 2003 and 2005 were discriminatory. As a result, 20 cities and towns across the Commonwealth were ordered to hire a total of 66 minority candidates who took the police and firefighters exams during those years.

Conlon said he has approached several minority patrol officers and suggested they take the test, but the officers told him they were not interested in the added responsibility.

In Worcester, where only three of the 99 supervisors are minorities, Police Chief Gary Gemme said he is focused on increasing the number of minority patrol officers so that the pool of minority candidates for supervisor expands.

Gemme said that when he became acting chief in fall 2004, he asked his only minority supervisor at the time, Sergeant John Lewis, to lead the recruiting office. Through Lewis's lead, the department hired eight minority patrol officers and two minority supervisors. The department is expected to hire its fourth minority supervisor by July 2008.

Lewis, a 17-year veteran, said there are several factors behind the low number of minority supervisors, including a lack of preparation in taking the promotional exam.

"It takes a lot of effort and time to get a good mark," Lewis said. "Honestly it takes about a year to study for the exam, and you have to spend money to take the study classes. It's probably just

interest when it comes down to it. When I took the exam, I sought out others who had taken it and passed, and I asked them what they did to prepare." "

Both Williams-Mitchell and Lewis said many minority officers who would make great supervisors join specialized units, such as the detectives bureau or the drug unit, and become complacent in those positions.

"Once they get in those units, the likelihood that they will take the exam diminishes," Williams-Mitchell said.

Geoff Ward, an assistant professor at Northeastern University and a member of the Justice George Lewis Ruffin Society, said it is important for minority youth to get the message that they can become police supervisors. The society, based at Northeastern University, was founded in 1984 to promote the advancement of minorities in criminal justice professions in Massachusetts.

"I'm not sure that the youth in the communities plagued by high levels of violence have ever had the message conveyed to them that they can look to law enforcement as a place where they can become leaders. We construct them as people who exist outside this institution," Ward said.■