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Police force diversity

by Kevin Elliott

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In the early morning hours of July 23, 1967, a group of about 80 black people were celebrating the return of soldiers from Vietnam at a blind pig at 12th Street, now Rosa Parks Boulevard, and Clairmont Street in Detroit, when a predominantly white police force raided the club. What ensued after was a five-day riot that spread through Detroit, leaving 43 people dead, 1,189 injured, and more than 2,000 buildings destroyed.

The events leading to the 1967 riot can't be attributed to that single incident, and the riot was hardly the first of its kind in Detroit. Race riots also marred the city in 1943 and 1863, the latter of which led to the creation of a full-time police department in the city. Yet in 1967, about 93 percent of the Detroit Police Department were white males in a city where about 33 percent of its population was African American. And, while the department and attitudes have evolved during the course of recent history, many police departments across the nation are hardly representative of the communities they serve, including several in Michigan and Oakland County.

Today, law enforcement agencies across the country, state and county are striving to increase the number of officers belonging to minority groups. However, recruiting, hiring and retaining diverse candidates can be a challenge, according to local police chiefs and the Oakland County Sheriff's Office. In addition to strong candidates from minority or ethnic groups, police departments also face challenges in recruiting women. The issue is now one that is being discussed at a national level and among academic leaders at the state's universities.

Brad Smith, interim chair of Wayne State University's Department of Criminal Justice, said having diversity amongst law enforcement serves to benefit both departments and the public in general.

"In a democratic society, the police should be representative of the people that they serve. It brings a variety of unique perspectives, and they can connect with people of different backgrounds," Smith said. "Whether it's racial or ethnic diversity or male-female, most of our departments are not very diverse. Most of our departments are dominated by men, and white men."

In terms of female police, about one in eight police officers across the nation are female, including about one in 10 first-line supervisors, according to a 2013 survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics. The study, which was published in May 2015, includes the most recent figures available on local police department personnel, policies and practices.

In 2013, about 58,000 – or 12 percent – of the full-time sworn personnel in local police departments were female. That figure remained the same from 2007 to 2013, but was up about 8 percent since 1987, when the survey was first conducted.

Since the inception of the study, the employment of female officers has increased in all population categories, but larger jurisdictions have continued to employ females at a higher rate, a trend that is found among officers of ethnic or minority populations. In departments serving populations between 50,000 and 100,000, female officers represent about 9.7 percent of sworn officers. The figure drops to 8.8 percent in municipalities between 25,000 and 50,000; 7.8 percent in those between 10,000 and 25,000; 7.5 percent in populations below 10,000 but more than 2,500; and 6.1 percent in communities with less than 2,500 people.

Statewide, the number of female officers is just below 12 percent, with 2,264 of the state's 19,041 certified police officers being women, according to the Michigan Commission on Law Enforcement Standards (MCOLES), which is responsible for certifying all peace officers in the state. In Oakland County, about 9.9 percent of the county's 2,058 sworn officers are women.

Of the roughly 596 different law enforcement agencies in Michigan, about 26 have female police chiefs, including the Michigan State Police department, which is headed by Col. Kriste Kibbey Etue.

A program of the Feminist Majority Foundation, the National Center for Women and Policing, has promoted increasing the number of women at all ranks of law enforcement as a strategy to improving police response to violence against women, reducing police brutality and strengthening community policing reforms.

"Twenty years of exhaustive research demonstrates that women police officers utilize a style of policing that relies less on physical force and more on communication skills that defuse potentially violent situations," according to the center's website.

"Women police officers are therefore much less likely to be involved in occurrences of police brutality, and also much more likely to effectively respond to police calls regarding violence against women."

Comment from the center wasn't available, as it is no longer in operation since the person who had been running it has since retired, according to the Feminist Majority Foundation.

Wayne State University's Smith said one of the reasons that there may be fewer women in law enforcement is that there are fewer informal support networks for women in policing, including a host of challenges for recruiting. However, he said there is still mixed research on what factor race and gender play in violent encounters.

"I don't think you'll see a reduction in shootings," he said. "It doesn't matter the race or gender or ethnicity of a person when they are threatened with a weapon. But in less serious situations, you may have fewer conflicts."

Sgt. Meghan Lehman, spokeswoman for the Troy Police Department, said she doesn't feel there is a specific style attributed to males or females.

"I don't think there's a style that is specific to gender. I think it varies from officer to officer," she said. "It could. You never know who the individual officer you're talking to might relate to. It could be a factor that helps."

Of the 100 sworn officers at the Troy Police Department, Lehman said 11 are female. And, while she said the department doesn't track race or ethnicity among the ranks, she said it's helpful to have a diverse workforce.

"There are over 80 languages spoken in Troy, so when we have officers that speak those languages, it's helpful," she said. "We have outreach programs, so we try to establish ourselves as a helpful presence and hopefully spark an interest in law enforcement as a career for a variety of people."

Nationally, about 27 percent of local police officers belonged to a racial or ethnic minority in 2013, compared to just 15 percent in 1987, according to the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics.

About 130,000 minority local police were employed in 2013, up about 78,000 (150 percent) from 1987. About 58,000 African American officers were employed by departments in 2013, up 5 percent from 2007. Approximately 55,000 Hispanic or Latino officers were employed by departments in 2013, up about 16 percent since 2007; and about 14,000 officers were members of other minority groups (Asian, Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska native), up about 2.7 percent in 2007 and four times more than in 1987, according to the study.

The Michigan Commission on Law Enforcement Standards began automated tracking of racial and ethnic minorities in law enforcement in 2004. Statistics from MCOLES that include race or ethnicity prior to 2004 aren't available. Statewide, 5,451 officers have been certified since 2004, including 614 African American officers; 128 Hispanic or Latino; 51 American Indian; 37 multi-racial or other; 36 Asian; 17 Arabic; four Pacific Islander; and two Alaskan.

In Oakland County, a total of 601 law enforcement officers have been certified by MCOLES since 2004, including 27 African American; eight Hispanic or Latino; four Asian; and two Arabic.

Often criticized as one of the metro Detroit locations for Caucasians fleeing urban Detroit, Oakland County has been a landing strip for white flight from the city for decades. Today, with a population of about 1.2 million people, according to the latest U.S. Census numbers, about 76.9 percent of Oakland County's residents are white, compared to 80 percent of the state's 9.9 million residents. Yet about 15 percent of the county's largest law enforcement agency, the Oakland County Sheriff's Office, are considered minorities. That figure increases to slightly more than 26 percent if women are included. Those percentages include only sworn officers, which are certified peace officers through the Michigan Commission on Law Enforcement Standards, which licenses all law enforcement officers in the state.

Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard said his office works to recruit a diverse workforce. Doing so, he said, is healthy both for the department and the communities it serves.

"Demographically, if you look at the last numbers, the Hispanic and African American population is about 16 or 17 percent in Oakland County, so we are pretty darn close to being reflective," Bouchard said. "I think it's helpful to have a diverse workforce in order to have different perspectives of a situation. Everyone grows up with their own kind of optics. If you have 30 different optics looking a situation, you might get 30 different perspectives, and that's helpful. It also helps us connect with the communities we serve."

Census figures for Oakland County in 2013 indicate the African American population makes up about 14.4 percent of the county, while the Hispanic population accounts for about 3.7 percent of the total. However, the Asian population in Oakland County accounts for about 6.3 percent of the total population, while people of two or more other races make up approximately 2.1 percent of the county's population.

Bouchard said the department doesn't go so far as to break down ethnic minority groups into smaller categories. Regardless,

he said the department works to encourage people from all groups to consider a career in law enforcement. In addition to attending job and recruiting fairs, Bouchard said the office is trying to spark interest in a police/military-centric education program in Pontiac.

"It would be good to encourage more people to think about it," Bouchard said. "I know we've been to at least eight job fairs this year."

Despite efforts in recruiting, Bouchard said the department hires the best people, without regard to any optics.

"That's the way we promote, too," he said. "We don't say 'this is a white guy promotion.' We don't want to get into that. We want to look at who is the best person and who is the most qualified to be hired today, and basically be colorblind. But we do want to actively recruit applicants from minorities."

In other words, while departments such as the sheriff's office work to bring more diversity into the application pool, those that make the cut and who are retained are based on performance and skills. And while such practices can be inclusive, they also are exclusive in their hiring.

The recruiting and hiring process is part of the challenge for law enforcement agencies that are working to attract diverse candidates, said Wayne State University's Smith.

"There are a variety of challenges," he said. "First, racial and ethnic groups in economically disadvantaged areas tend to be disproportionately involved in the criminal justice system. Many agencies have pretty thorough background checks, and they exclude people for felonies, for drunk driving, and even misdemeanor charges," Smith said. "If a kid gets caught with alcohol and gets a minor in possession ticket, as an adult he may not be able to get a job in a lot of police agencies. That screens out a lot of kids from poorer backgrounds because they are more likely to have a bad encounter with police."

The scenario also raises the issue of having negative relations with police. While some folks are raised with the notion that police officers are friends that can be trusted and are there to help, others are raised in a culture of being fearful or consider the police simply disrespectful. Such a situation obviously does little to encourage a career in law enforcement.

Michigan State Police First Lt. Robert Hendrix is currently responsible for recruiting and selection in a newly developed position designed to create diversity among potential candidates and the department.

"In today's times, it's a harder sell than it has been before," Hendrix said about recruiting. "We are looking for folks that are service minded and want to give back to their communities, not just criminal justice majors."

Black and raised in Detroit, Hendrix said the state police department had an appeal to him that wasn't present in the local Detroit department.

"I was going to be an electrical engineer. I ended up staying in that job until I learned the state police were hiring. I knew state police were different than the Detroit Police Department where I grew up. The next thing I knew, I was in recruit school. I was 28 at the time.

"I wouldn't have considered the Detroit Police Department at that time," Hendrix said. "(State police) seemed more professional. When I was younger I had gotten stopped by them, and they were always professional. They were professional and polite, and that's the way I was raised by my parents. I joined in 1989. I have 26 years in now."

Of the total 1,836 sworn officers at the Michigan State Police department, 171 are white females, which includes the department's director; 29 Native American males; nine male and two female troopers are of Pacific Islander ethnicity; 103 male and 10 female, African Americans; and 50 male and one female, Hispanics.

The department earlier this year caught headlines for its decline in diversity since federal mandates were lifted at the department for failing to hire enough females and minorities. While Hendrix said it may be true that the number of minorities in the department have fallen in recent years, he said the overall number of troopers has also fallen to about 1,836, from close to 2,700 or more in 1989. In July of 2014, the department moved its recruiting section from the training division into its Lansing headquarters, where Hendrix heads the unit.

The decline in law enforcement officers is a trend across the state, as the number of officer positions has dropped from about 23,150 in 2001 to 19,039, as of May 2015, according to monthly law enforcement population trends released by MCOLES.

"That's one of the big stories. It's been dropping since Sept. 11, 2001," said MCOLES Deputy Executive Director Hermina Kramp. "The drop in population was heavily impacted by the downturn in the economy, as well as a downturn in revenue sharing. It's not that (agencies) don't need officers. It's a dollars and cents issue for them. A lot of agencies and communities have had to make tough choices."

The recession, beginning in 2008, caused additional difficulties for police departments throughout the nation, including

problems with budget and workforce reductions, consolidations, while at the same time increasing responsibilities and difficulties attracting and hiring qualified, diverse and skilled personnel, according to Jeremy Wilson, research director and associate professor at the Michigan State University School of Criminal Justice. However, regardless of economic conditions, departments have historically had a difficulty recruiting and maintaining a workforce that reflects their communities, Wilson said in a 2014 paper, "Strategies for Police Recruitment: A Review of Trends, Contemporary Issues and Existing Approaches." Additionally, Wilson says that historical concerns about recruiting minorities and women have now expanded to concerns about whether the profession can market itself to a new generation of workers.

"Whereas departments have historical difficulties recruiting women and minority applicants, their inability to grapple with generational differences has shown the profession to be underprepared for the rapidly changing and uncertain economic and social landscape," he said in the paper.

Wayne State's Smith also said departments that want to increase diversity have to take affirmative steps to recruit people, including going to career fairs that extend beyond their state.

"Wayne State has a career fair that is co-sponsored by the National Association of Black Law Enforcement Executives. They reach out to agencies to show up, so we get agencies as far away as Texas," he said. "If departments are serious about recruiting, they have to seek them out, and that means going far. There is a demand now, and they are fighting for candidates now, which is great for students who want to go into law enforcement."

Part of the challenge for law enforcement agencies, Smith said, is drawing people into the field from underrepresented groups.

"It's not that it isn't respectable, but a lot of young men have had negative encounters with police, so why would they want to be a police officer?" he asked. "Others have high crime in their neighborhoods, so they have a desire to commit to changing that. That's what some of these agencies need to look at, and they need to sell themselves as that."

Novi Police Chief David Molloy said the ultimate goal in recruiting is to have a department be representative of the community. Novi, he said, has a population that is about 72-73 percent white; 8 percent African American; 3 percent Hispanic; and about 16 percent other, which includes many Asian, Japanese, Korean and Indian populations.

Like Troy, Novi has a diverse population with many different languages spoken.

"We would love to have a department that is representative of that population," he said. "We try to be as representative as we can, but it's always a challenge."

Of the 64 officers at the Novi police department, he said seven are female; one is African American; one Hispanic; one Indian; one Albanian; and one of Middle Eastern descent.

"Since becoming chief in 2005, the numbers have gone up," he said. "For a long time, we only had three women. In 2007, we had a lot of good candidates that we were able to attract. I think it's a good thing. They have communication skills and the physical ability to handle any situation they are placed into."

In terms of the hiring process, departments cannot factor race or ethnicity into their decisions, under state law. However, Molloy said the department works to recruit from specific areas when possible.

"We are very close partners with the Japanese School of Detroit, in Novi," he said. "We want to help Asians who are moving and coming to Novi. Any given Saturday, you have 800 families coming to the school here, and we are looking for ways to reach them."

One way Novi has worked to attract candidates is by having a police cadet program for many years. Molloy said the program has worked as a feeder system to the department, resulting in dozens of applications for open positions, while still holding hiring standards high.

"We have had a bachelor's degree requirement for 40-plus years," he said. "We were one of the first in the state to mandate that. I don't think we should lower our standards at any point and time, we should hire and retain the best people, regardless of their race."

The Bloomfield Township Police Department also requires officers to have a bachelor's degree, said Capt. Scott McCanham, who said the department works with EMPCO Inc. to find potential candidates, as well as the Macomb County police academy.

"We require a bachelor's degree. That sort of thins out the recruits to begin with," he said. "We are looking for the best officer, versus gender or race."

Of the 66 sworn officers in the Bloomfield Township department, McCanham said seven are female; one is Hispanic ; one is

Asian American; and one is Chaldean.

"We are actively recruiting out of all minority groups, but it's hard to get qualified candidates. The academy classes are as big as ever," he said. "We focus on what we have to offer here. The competition is extremely stiff, and so many departments are hiring with the economy recovering. They are all filling those spots that they cut five or eight years ago."

One change from previous years is that departments are often hiring officers that are already accredited or have gone through a training academy. In prior years, departments would often send new recruits to a training academy as part of the training process. However, companies like EMPACO, which is utilized by several departments in Oakland County, provide candidates who are already trained.

"We tell EMPACO what we want, and we hope there are minorities there," said Detective Lt. Curt Lawson of the West Bloomfield Police Department. "The community itself is very diverse. Chaldean, Jewish, African American, Hmong, Russian – it's a mixing bowl here. Even though our officers are predominantly white, we provide diversity training. They are comfortable in their own skin working in this community."

Lawson said the department has 69 sworn officers, but is hoping to reach 77 in the next 12 months. Of those currently employed, he said five are female; two are African American; and three are Chaldean.

"There are some others, but I'm not comfortable asking what they are," he said. "We continue to look for top quality candidates out there for our police department."

Bloomfield Hills Police Department Chief Dave Hendricksen, who was with the Warren Police Department prior to coming to Oakland County, said the department hires about once every two years.

"In Warren, we really tried to hire African Americans. We really did, and there really wasn't much interest on their part," he said. "I can't blame them. They view the police as a not very welcoming place. Here (in Bloomfield Hills) we only hire every two years or so, and we have to hire the best. We don't know who they are – it's blind interviews. We recently had a woman get pretty far through the process, but we ended up with more white males."

"I'd like to get some different diversity and gender diversity. We don't have a lot of applicants that aren't white males."

Despite the lack of diversity in some communities, Southfield Police Chief Eric Hawkins said African-American officers are one group that is fairly well represented in law enforcement, both locally and nationally. Of the 123 sworn officers at his department, he said 15 are white females; 13 black males; one black female; and two Chaldean males.

White Lake Police Chief Adam Kline said the department doesn't track ethnicity or race, but that two of the 26 sworn officers in the department are women.

"The only trend I've noticed is that applications and volume was down from prior years," he said. "My opinion is that it's because there are more departments hiring. I can only point to economics and population movement."

Wolverine Lake Village Police Chief John Ellsworth said his department has 10 officers, two of which are women.

"I don't particularly look for male, female, African American or their descent. I look at qualifications. I eliminate the ones that aren't qualified and go that route," he said.

Walled Lake Police Chief Paul Shakinis said the department has 18 sworn officers, of which three are women. "One is a minority, or non-white, if that's the correct terminology," he said.

Shakinis said the department advertises openings through the state's MCOLES.

"With that, every applicant that has experience gets a thorough review and possibly an interview if they pass an initial background check."

Birmingham Police Chief Don Studt said the department also uses EMPACO to find candidates for both the police and fire departments. Of the 30 sworn officers at the Birmingham Police Department, the department employs four white females; one black male; and one Arabic male.

"They provide the written test, and we pull from their list," he said. "We go with the ones that stand out."

Milford Police Chief Tom Lindberg said of the department's 18 sworn officers, two are female, and two are non-white.

"We don't have a major concern, as say Troy or Novi, or Farmington Hills, which has a large Indian population," he said. "In small communities, it may be a little different."

Lindberg, who is head of the Oakland County Police Chiefs Association, said there often are conversations among the members about diversity amongst the ranks.

"Nobody knows what a real good answer is. In every community you want a police force to reflect their community," he said. "Culturally, there are some groups that aren't drawn to police work or the public sector. That could be a byproduct of the culture. It's difficult for us to manage. Milford is significantly different in terms of the population base, but we should have a little more diversity than we have."

Lindberg said there seems to be a lack of effort in the educational system to push students into police work or public service, which affects all aspects of recruiting. He said finding a way to push young people toward a career in law enforcement, while still in college, could help increase diversity in the recruitment pool.

"Hopefully, if you push that a little, there's some investment in it, and colleges with a with a diverse student base can push some students into law enforcement."