

NATION & WORLD



Police departments are struggling with a “historic crisis in recruiting and retaining” officers, the Justice Department said. Some police departments hope a more diverse recruiting plan will help fill the gaps. JUSTIN SULLIVAN, GETTY IMAGES FILE

Police seek more diverse recruits amid staffing crisis

But some critics say culture has to change first

N’dea Yancey-Bragg
USA TODAY

Though Eberechukwu Nwanegwo applied for a summer internship at the Baltimore Police Department, she had no interest in becoming a cop.

Given the media coverage of police brutality, she was nervous about joining the department and didn’t want to tell her family and friends. But the 23-year-old nursing major needed to earn money while studying for her board exams, and it was only for a few weeks. Maybe she’d

learn something, she thought.

Nwanegwo said her outlook completely changed after the first day, when her supervisor gave her a binder outlining a consent decree. She was surprised to see the reforms the department had agreed to. Throughout the program, she was given assignments she never knew a police department could offer – from buying groceries for victims of violence to working in an office dedicated to increasing equity in the department.

See STAFFING, Page 17A

Staffing

Continued from Page 13A

"I left like 'OK, how can I do this for the rest of my life?'" she said.

For Baltimore Police, this was a big success. It's one of the law enforcement departments that are trying to solve a national staffing shortage by recruiting more young people of color and women. Some experts say that also could improve policing.

In local police departments, about 14% of full-time sworn officers are women, 14% are Hispanic and 12% are Black, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Though experts have said diversity alone is not enough to address issues with policing, some research has shown that Black and Hispanic officers make fewer arrests and use force less often than their white counterparts, and that female officers take those enforcement actions less often than men.

Nwanegwo's internship was part of a program launched by the Police Executive Research Forum to offer internships at 29 police departments to students at historically Black colleges and universities.

When the Minneapolis Police Department joined the program, no one applied at first, according to Chief Brian O'Hara. He understood why.

"This is a police department that murdered George Floyd, so there's a whole lot of skepticism," O'Hara said.

'Historic' recruitment crisis requires culture shift

Police departments are struggling with a "historic crisis in recruiting and retaining" officers, the Justice Department said in October. Though hiring reportedly rebounded in 2022, agencies are losing officers faster than they can replace them, according to a survey of 182 police agencies across 38 states and Washington from the Police Executive Research Forum.

Alex Johnston, co-founder of Epic Recruiting, said when departments approach his company for help with marketing, attracting diverse candidates is often a priority.

"If this next generation doesn't choose law enforcement, then we're in a really not only dangerous path, but also a path that's probably going to end in further inequity," said Andy Saunders, co-founder of New Blue, which supports officers interested in reform.

Some departments are offering as much as \$75,000 in signing bonuses to attract recruits, but Saunders said more money may not be enough to attract diverse candidates.

When New Blue launched, Saunders said he tried to recruit college students of color. But an analysis found many would not commit to policing even when they were offered an extra \$30,000 per year. He said one of the most powerful reasons given was fear of what their loved ones would think of them.

Saunders said some departments have also tried to attract diverse talent by relaxing grooming requirements or updating the application process. But "allowing tattoos and dreadlocks does not make Gen Z say, 'Oh, that was the thing holding me back,'" he said. "It's the deeper values."



Minneapolis Police Chief Brian O'Hara found it understandable that few students from historically Black colleges and universities applied for an internship with his department as it seeks to diversify. "This is a police department that murdered George Floyd, so there's a whole lot of skepticism," O'Hara said. STEPHEN MATUREN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Departments may find themselves in something of a Catch-22, Saunders said: They want to hire more diverse candidates, but young people of color may not want to join an organization that is and historically has been predominantly white and male. But, he said, in addition to diversity, Gen Z candidates value transparency, social justice, civic engagement and they are more likely to join a department that demonstrates those values.

"Just having a chief say, 'I agree that law enforcement doesn't currently serve everyone and I would like to recruit diverse folks that can help me solve this issue,' and then publicly committing to that change can also show Gen Z officers that department is willing to listen to feedback and take action to address their concerns," he said.

Police look to HBCU students

HBCUs are one of the major targets for police recruiters looking to diversify their ranks. Johnston, of Epic Recruiting, recently created an ad campaign for Virginia's Norfolk Police Department, aimed at a nearby HBCU, that featured several of the department's Black officers.

"We created specific content for that specific audience, and we featured individuals that represented them and could speak to them and inspire them to pursue this as a successful career," Johnston said.

Recruiting from these schools can be a challenge.

Since 2018, 44 HBCU students have expressed interest in applying for the college scholarship offered by the Winston-Salem Police Department in North Carolina.

"We're serious about diversity, so we're working hard, and that's why we budgeted for this scholarship," said Chief William H. Penn Jr. "We want to give that scholarship out more."

But after learning about the requirements - which include working for the department for at least three years after graduation - just five students applied, recruiting Sgt. Kayla Carleton said.

While internship programs alone can't fully solve the nationwide staffing shortage, when successful, they can be an important part of improving officer

recruitment and retention, according to a report from the Police Executive Research Forum. Much like Nwanegwo, every intern who responded to a survey agreed the experience had positively changed their opinion of policing in general and as a career, with 65% expressing a desire to apply for a position as a sworn officer, PERF said.

"By helping students gain a better understanding of both policing and police, internships can also help build public trust in the profession," the report said.

Seeking bilingual recruits in Puerto Rico

Police departments in several states including Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas have announced plans to hire more Spanish-speaking officers by recruiting in Puerto Rico.

Dallas Police Chief Eddie Garcia, who was born on the island, has gone back with his department twice in search of recruits and plans to return in April.

"Nearly half of our population here in Dallas is Latino and there are a lot of individuals that are Spanish-speaking," Garcia said. "It's incredibly important for us."

Garcia said some potential recruits are hesitant to move to Texas. The department tries to entice them by offering help with housing and bringing other officers from the area, "so that these young men and women from Puerto Rico can see people that resemble themselves, that took the chance, got it and are successful."

Much like the efforts aimed at HBCUs, not all such campaigns are successful. Memphis city officials went to Puerto Rico in July to fill positions at the police department and other agencies. "It was not successful for us," city spokesperson Arlenia Cole said in a statement.

The Prince George's County Police Department in Maryland had to put plans for a recruiting trip to Puerto Rico on hold. In the meantime, the agency is making a "concerted effort" to reach out to the local community, spokesperson Brian Fischer said - "in Spanish and on a vehicle like Telemundo and Univision."

Nina Medina, president of the Latino Peace Officers Association, said her group is working with local police agencies to spread the word about job openings and to mentor recruits.

Hundreds of agencies join initiative to recruit women

More than 360 law enforcement agencies around the country have signed onto the 30x30 initiative, a campaign that aims to get police recruit classes to be 30% women by 2030, according to co-founder Maureen McGough.

McGough, executive director of the Excellence in Policing and Public Safety Program at the University of South Carolina School of Law, said advocates aren't simply telling departments to hire more women but to think more critically about the skills needed for fair and effective policing.

"If you do that, we're very confident, you'll see an increase in the representation of women in your ranks," she said.

Changes could include targeting nurses, psychologists and educators; rethinking when and how recruits are tested on certain physical fitness requirements; and making marketing campaigns more accurately reflect the community service aspects of policing, McGough said. For instance, a few years ago, she heard about a law enforcement agency that put out a commercial featuring "a giant dude hanging out of a helicopter with guns strapped to his chest," she said. "So that's reaching a very small subset of the population with a message that isn't accurate about what policing is and what it takes to do it well." (Also, the agency didn't even have a drone, let alone a helicopter.)

An early agency to join the 30x30 initiative was Mesa Police Department in Arizona. Its recruitment team has several women, including Elisha Gibbs. Outreach includes advertisements that illustrate the department's commitment to work/life balance, something Gibbs heard women who have or want children are concerned about.

While some departments have changed or eliminated certain physical requirements that presented a barrier to women, Gibbs said she's focused on helping female recruits learn the proper technique to pass a test that once intimidated her: scaling a 6-foot wall.

Since 2020, the number of female officers in the department has risen from 90 to 113. Though the increase is small, Gibbs said the new approach has helped.

"Getting them in on ride-a-longs ... talking to them, showing them videos, putting it out on our social media or TikTok or Instagram the different jobs that you can have throughout the profession has been a really big help," she said.

To make the biggest impact, McGough's group is trying to target state-level agencies and ensure their work is intentionally intersectional, despite a "frustrating lack" of research on how the experiences of female law enforcement officers of different ethnic and racial groups differ.

"Women aren't a homogenous group, and we want to make sure everybody's unique needs are met and everyone's unique value is understood and celebrated," she said.

Contributing: Bart Jansen, USA TODAY.