Promoting Police Diversity Through a Community-Building Emphasis

Timmy Thomas

Criminal Justice 2413: Police Systems and Practice
Professor Aristotle Johnson
May 7, 2010
Even before the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1950s and 1960s, most major cities in the United States had integrated police forces, but minority police officers were generally kept within the lower ranks of the command chain. In the decades following the civil rights movement, this imbalance in the command chain remained. This was due partly to actual discrimination in the promotion process, partly to differences in the educational levels of black and white officers, and partly to the fact that black patrolmen working under white superiors were given fewer opportunities to gain the knowledge, expertise, and personal connections necessary to climb the chain of command. But whatever the cause, this lack of upward mobility for minority officers generated a great deal of racial tension within integrated police departments. In an age of increasing racial equality, black police officers resented working within an all-white command structure. In recent decades, many departments in places like Chicago, San Francisco, and New Orleans have responded with promotion quotas to ensure that a significant number of minority officers advance up the chain of command. Such quotas have had an overall positive effect on race relations within police departments, but racial tensions are still a problem, and the quotas themselves have become a source of tension as they are increasingly viewed as systems of “racial preference” that discriminate against white officers. In order to achieve more equality and harmony within today’s police forces, then, police departments need to go beyond mere quotas and adopt promotion policies that acknowledge and reward the unique contributions of minority officers.

Promotion quotas are important for establishing a basic level of equality within police departments; but since quotas deal only with numbers, they do not address the
deeper divisions that often strain race relations within police units. No matter how much
equality of opportunity there is within a police unit, white cops and minority cops often
find themselves at odds because of differences in how they perceive crime and their role
as police officers. Consider, for instance, the situation of Detective Johnny Gonzalez, a
Dominican-born undercover cop whose experiences within a Harlem narcotics unit are
related in a recent *New York Times* article (Winerip, 2000). Every day, Detective
Gonzalez goes undercover within depressed Harlem neighborhoods
where the struggle to survive leads many into drug-related activities. As
the son of immigrant parents, Detective Gonzalez knows firsthand the
intensity of suffering and stress that leads many Harlem residents into the illegal
activities that he arrests them for. Detective Gonzalez was one of the lucky few who
found a way out of the cycle of poverty and crime that grips these neighborhoods, but he
still feels a deep sense of common identity with the black and
Latino drug-dealers, pimps, and petty thieves whom he works to put
behind bars. But the white cops who work alongside Detective
Gonzalez do not seem to appreciate the conflicts that make his job so difficult; in fact,
they not only overlook his struggles but also resent the fact that as an undercover cop he
avoids some of the more tedious duties that uniformed cops must perform, like executing
search warrants and transporting convicts to jail (Winerip, 2000). This resentment leads
to acts of racial insensitivity that only deepen Detective Gonzalez’s sense of alienation
and conflict.

Detective Gonzalez’s situation is similar to that of many minority policemen who,
unlike most of their white counterparts, have close ties to the communities that they
patrol. As Sun and Payne (2004) demonstrate in their comparison of conflict resolution strategies among black and white police officers, many black officers understand themselves to have a role within black communities that transcends law enforcement (p. 523). While operating within these black communities, black police officers are more likely than their white counterparts to try to resolve conflicts peacefully and without arrests. They are also more likely to engage in “supportive activities” such as “counseling, offering physical assistance and information, and showing courtesy and concern” (Sun & Payne, 2004, p. 522). These black officers feel a deeper sense of connection to the neighborhoods that they patrol and, consequently, they feel a deeper sense of obligation to help uplift those communities through their on-duty work and their off-duty activities. Unfortunately, however, this type of community-building activity has rarely factored into decisions about promotions.

One of the problems with simple quota systems is that the minority officers who are selected for promotion are usually those who exhibit the values, attitudes, and behaviors of their white superiors. Often this does more to create divisions and animosities among the minority officers themselves than to ease tension across racial lines. But while all departments have (or should have) an interest in reducing racial tensions, they have been reluctant to acknowledge and reward legitimate alternatives to the conventional law enforcement values. In recent years, however, police departments across the nation have begun to pay more attention to the ways in which strong relationships between police departments and communities help law enforcement officials prevent and respond to crimes more effectively. Duffee, et. al. (2006), for
instance, mention efforts by police departments in places like San Diego, Seattle, Portland, Indianapolis, and Spokane to engage in “police-neighborhood partnerships [that] involve coordination on multiple issues pertaining to crime, economic revitalization, education, and cultural awareness” (p. 4). Duffee, et. al. (2006) indicate that public safety is significantly improved in places where police departments emphasize community-building activities (p. 24). Programs like National Night Out, which brings community members and police officers into contact with each other, generate relationships and partnerships that enhance the law enforcement efforts of the local police (Morris, 2000, p. 3). As Sun and Payne (2004) indicate, minority officers are uniquely positioned to assume leading roles in such community-building efforts.

It would appear, then, that minority police officers have an important role to play in the transformation of police departments from straight law enforcement entities into community-building entities that also happen to be responsible for enforcing the law. With this in mind, police departments across the nation must develop methods for assessing the community-building activities of their officers and for incorporating these assessments into the promotion process. So far, this has not happened, but such a shift could have multiple benefits. Among these, it should provide an advantage to minority officers—particularly those who do not mirror traditional law enforcement values—without being perceived as a system of “racial preference.” Equally important, it should encourage even white officers to take a greater interest in the community-building side of law enforcement. Taken together, these two trends would go a long way toward abolishing the lingering racial tensions within modern-day police departments.
It would be a tragic mistake, however, for police departments to use a greater emphasis on community-building as an excuse for dropping their quota systems. It is vitally important that police departments mirror the racial and ethnic compositions of their surrounding communities and that this diversity be reflected throughout the chain of command. History has taught us that quota systems, despite all their faults, are the only way to achieve this. It is very unlikely that a promotion policy that rewards community-building activities would, by itself, produce the type of racial and ethnic balance that is achieved through quota systems. If used in combination with quota systems, however, such a policy would help to reduce racial tensions within diverse police departments because it would ensure that minority officers are rewarded for values and behaviors that connect them to their racial and ethnic communities rather than for values and behaviors that disconnect them from those communities. Additionally, such a policy would enhance the law enforcement potential of police departments by creating stronger connections with the communities that they serve.
References


