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MARYLAND

Across the board, Baltimore area police departments are much whiter than the people they serve



By PAMELA WOOD
BALTIMORE SUN | SEP 11, 2019



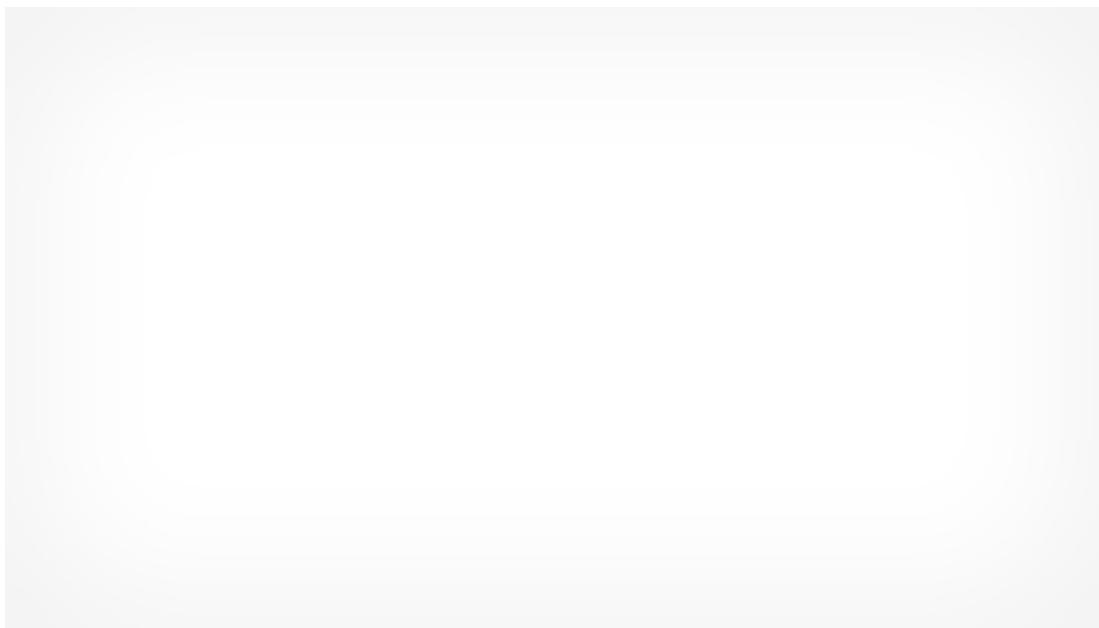


Police cadet Nathan Keller shares information with Nautica Reynolds, 25, about joining the Baltimore County Police Department. Recruiters have started a monthly recruitment effort at Towson Town Center, in part to increase the diversity of the police department. (BALTIMORE SUN STAFF / Baltimore Sun)

Despite promises of diversity, the Baltimore region's major police departments remain overwhelmingly whiter than the communities they serve.

As Baltimore County faces [**a federal lawsuit over a test for police applicants**](#) because more African Americans fail, it's not the only jurisdiction to struggle with recruiting nonwhite officers.

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A review by The Baltimore Sun found that minority groups are underrepresented among police officers in Baltimore City and Baltimore, Howard and Anne Arundel counties.

In Baltimore County, 80% of sworn police officers are white, while whites are just 57% of the county's overall population, according to census data. Similar disparities are found in other counties.

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In Howard County, where only a slim majority of residents are white, 78% of police officers are white.

Anne Arundel's police force is 82% white, while the county is 68% white as a whole.

Baltimore City's police force is the most diverse in the region, at 45% white, 40% African American and 12% Hispanic. But whites are still overrepresented compared with the city population, which is just 28% white and 63% African American.

"Our community deserves and honestly, our police officers want a diverse department that's reflective of who we are and how we serve," said Baltimore County Police Chief Melissa Hyatt, who became the department's leader in June.

[More: Try the Baltimore County police exams that led to DOJ suit »](#)

The U.S. Department of Justice sued Baltimore County last month, alleging that a test for police officer applicants the county used until recently was discriminatory. The test included material that's irrelevant to police work and had the effect of screening out some minority applicants, the lawsuit alleges.

Justice Department officials have declined to discuss their allegations further or explain what led to the lawsuit. Given the lack of diversity in other police departments, it is not clear why the federal agency focused on Baltimore County. But as far back as 2012, federal officials were [investigating hiring practices](#) in Baltimore County's police and fire departments.

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Thirty years before that, Baltimore County settled a lawsuit with the Justice Department charging discrimination against blacks and women in all county hiring.

Alfred S. Titus Jr., associate professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, said it's important for police departments to be as diverse as their communities. It leads to better relationships with the community — and thus to better policing, he said.

"When you have a police department that reflects the community, there are less conflicts," said Titus, a former New York City homicide detective. "There are less

civilian complaints because the police officers and the community usually have a better relationship and an easier time communicating."

Titus noted that police departments face challenges in luring qualified young people into the profession, particularly given concerns nationally about the deaths of people of color, especially young black men, at the hands of police.

"They're not seen as a positive force, they're seen as a negative force," Titus said. He said improving community relations can help departments not only in their crime-fighting efforts but also in recruiting.

"One of the biggest things is just providing or creating a different image in policing — that it's a positive thing and they are here to help," Titus said.

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NOTE: "White" refers to non-Hispanic white in the county population figures. Other races may include those of Hispanic origin. SOURCES: U.S. Census Bureau, local police departments as of Aug. 2019 | Baltimore Sun graphic

Police departments in the region say they have adjusted their recruiting strategies and some of their hiring procedures in hopes of persuading people of color to apply. They're more often visiting historically black colleges and universities, speaking at black churches and targeting their advertising to reach minority residents.

"The only money we really spend on recruiting is going after minority candidates," said Anne Arundel County Police Chief Timothy J. Altomare.

But they say it's hard to find people of any demographic who want to be a cop. Across the board, Baltimore area law enforcement leaders say they are getting fewer applicants overall for jobs as entry-level police officers and sheriff's deputies.

"Right now, the perception of policing and the challenges of policing in the national conversation don't make it a particularly appealing career choice," said Hyatt, the Baltimore County chief.

Howard County Police Chief Lisa D. Myers, [who was appointed to her position in January](#), said departments need to improve community relations throughout their counties to draw minority applicants. Myers said she regularly reminds patrol officers that their conduct determines how the community feels about the police department. And that, in turn, can affect recruiting.

"If our officers are rude or dismissive, if when they get out in the communities their interactions are negative, I don't think our communities will see value in applying to our department," she said.

In Anne Arundel, Altomare said his department has made progress since he became chief in 2014, when only 7.25% of the department's officers were African American. That's climbed to nearly 14%, but still shy of the county's overall African American population of 18%.

Altomare said he still struggles to recruit Hispanic and Asian American applicants. On Tuesday, he appointed a Latino liaison officer he hopes can build relationships in Anne Arundel's Latino communities.

But he says he's at a loss in trying to recruit applicants from the county's growing Korean American community.

"The bottom line is we've got to keep moving that gauge towards being reflective of the community," Altomare said.

[More: Meet the female commanders in majority male Baltimore Police Department »](#)

Carl Snowden, founder of the county's Caucus of African American Leaders, said both the Anne Arundel County and City of Annapolis police departments have made progress in hiring black officers. He said that suggests they have the backing of local political leaders.

"Departments that are doing the best are those who want diversity as a hallmark of their administration," Snowden said.

In Baltimore County, Hyatt said she's reviewing the full recruiting and hiring process, and the county has pledged not to use the test the Department of Justice found to be a problem. More changes could be coming.

The department's recruiters are trying some new tactics, setting up a booth at the Towson Town Center mall once a month and partnering with Planet Fitness gyms, hoping to reach a diverse crowd that's interested in physical fitness.

At the mall Thursday afternoon, a team of police officers, background investigators
~~and a police cadet took turns trying to coax shoppers into conversations about~~

~~and a police recruiter took turns trying to coax shoppers into conversations about~~

police work. “Interested in law enforcement?” they’d ask passersby.

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Some shoppers barreled past, uninterested. Others — including a few wearing security guard uniforms — stopped to chat. A couple of people who had already applied peppered the recruiters with questions.

Nearby, a sign advertised “Heroes Wanted” and recruitment videos played on a TV that was seized as part of a criminal case.

Sgt. Vickie Warehime, Baltimore County’s recruiting supervisor, said using the mall for her efforts has advantages: The space is free, and it’s just down the road from police headquarters.

“You have to look at something that gives you an opportunity to be successful within your budget,” Warehime said.

And the effort seemed promising. Within the first hour, eight people had given their contact information and a few sat down at a laptop to start the application process.

“The foot traffic in the mall is amazing,” Warehime said.

Baltimore City Police are grappling with a shortage of hundreds of patrol officers that officials say has made it difficult to stem the city’s relentless violence. The city

since April 2017 has been operating under a consent decree reached after a Justice Department investigation found that officers routinely made unconstitutional stops, searches and arrests disproportionately affecting African Americans. Under the decree, the department must demonstrate that it is carrying out a recruitment plan to attract — and keep — minorities and women.

Besides recruiting, law enforcement leaders have limited leeway in how much they can adjust the hiring process because many requirements are set by the state.

A 2017 change that some chiefs hope might eventually increase applications across the board **relaxes rules on past marijuana use.**

Under the new rule, departments can accept applicants who have previously used marijuana, so long as they haven't used in the past three years. It replaced a prior 1970s-era rule that banned applicants who had used marijuana more than 20 times in their lives, or five times since turning 21 years old.

The rule change represented, in part, an acknowledgement that many states have decriminalized or even legalized marijuana, and that the drug now carries less of a taboo. Still, the change was controversial, as marijuana use remains illegal at the federal level.

Police and sheriff's departments are allowed to have a stricter marijuana rule, but they can't have a more relaxed rule.

Harford County Sheriff Jeffrey Gahler adopted the change in his county, even though he disagrees with it. But he said plenty of applicants are still forced out of the process because of drug use.

Some young people use marijuana in their late teens or college years before realizing they might want to become a police officer, he said.

"That's a whole pool of people who are limited from becoming a police officer for three years," Gahler said. Rather than wait three years, those individuals are likely **to follow a different career path**, he said.

Gahler said he has made numerous changes to try to reach more nonwhite applicants, to no avail.

He said he's scheduled more frequent physical abilities tests, offered more chances for applicants to pass the physical test, assigned mentors to recruits, offered bonuses to deputies who referred recruits, started a cadet program to serve as a pipeline and — against his personal wishes — relaxed the tattoo policy.

Gahler used to prohibit visible tattoos. "I had to give that up because I was turning too many people away," he said. "But that, too, has not changed our hiring numbers."

Harford's population is majority white — 76% — but the sheriff's office remains much whiter, at 93%.

Gahler said he has difficulty filling his academy classes with qualified recruits of any racial background. And he predicts he'll continue to struggle with diversity.

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“We’re not even getting the pool to start with,” he said. “Minority representation, female representation in the pool is much smaller.”

Pamela Wood



Pamela Wood covers Maryland politics from The Baltimore Sun's State House bureau in Annapolis. She's been with The Baltimore Sun since 2013, and previously wrote for The Capital, the Maryland Gazette, the Daily Times (Salisbury) and Gannett News Service. She grew up in Howard County and graduated from the University of Maryland.

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