



Your Department Doesn't Match the Diversity of your Community?

Consider The Effects of Rapidly Changing Demographics

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Public safety agencies are facing ever-increasing pressure to have the racial and ethnic diversity of their employees match or exceed the racial and ethnic diversity found within the communities. Sheriffs, police chiefs, and fire chiefs are often being called to account by municipal government leaders, citizens' groups, outside activists, and the news media for having a higher proportion of white employees than the proportion of the community that is currently white.

One element that is missing from this conversation, however, is *how fast did the demographic composition of the city change? Is it possible that the community was transformed from a majority white to a majority non-white population over the course of just a few years? If so, then it is very likely that part of the situation that needs to be discussed is employee longevity.* If the police department or fire department was representative of its mostly-white community when a large group of new employees was hired, one should expect that the agency will keep this mostly-white structure for many years as these employees serve 20, 25, or 30 year careers.

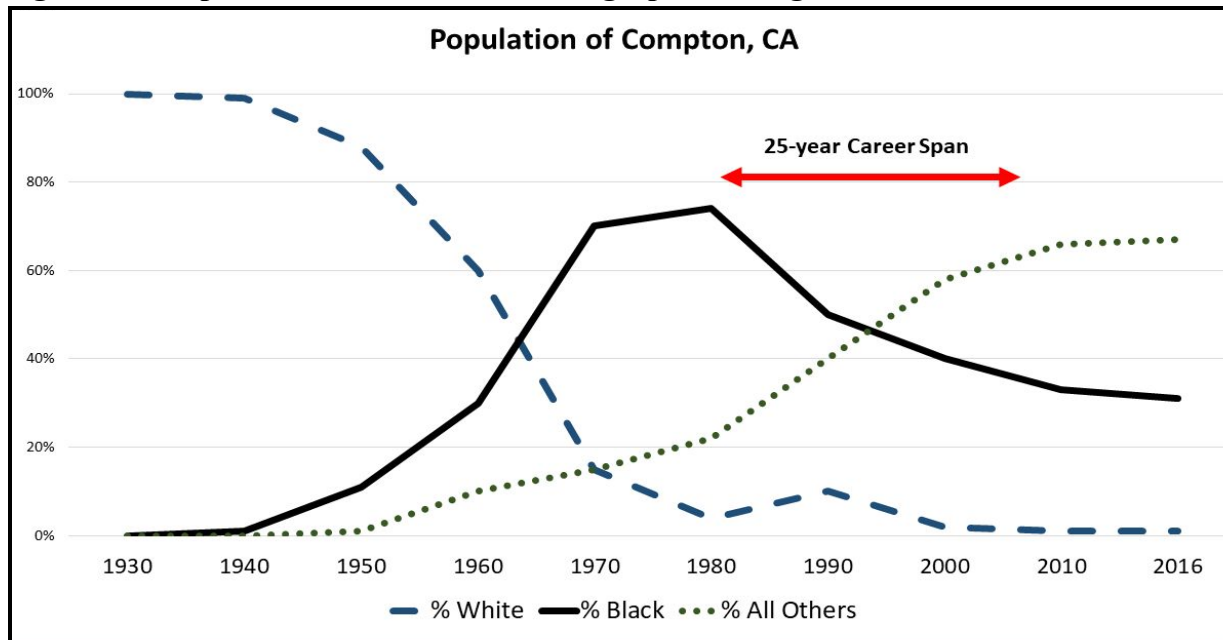
As good employees are retained and encouraged to stay until they are eligible for retirement, it takes a long time for the racial composition of a public safety agency to change. Sometimes it takes much longer for the demographics of an agency to change that it takes for the demographics of a community to change. One also needs to consider the economic effects of a large and rapid racial demographic change within a community. Sometimes a rapid shift in racial demographics coincides with a decline in property values. As a result, the tax funding for public safety sometimes declines, making it more difficult to hire *any* firefighters or police officers, much less racially diverse ones.

Below are two examples of communities that well illustrate how rapidly the racial demographics of a community can change.

Compton, California

Compton, California is a suburb of Los Angeles that currently has a population of approximately 97,000 inhabitants. It expanded in the 1950s with an orientation toward the housing of professionals employed by the airline industry. Near Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), its early residents were predominantly airline pilots, flight attendants, aircraft mechanics, and air traffic controllers.¹ As Figure 1 illustrates, the community has undergone multiple rapid changes in racial demographics before, during, and after that growth. Up until the end of World War II, the city was almost exclusively white, and was 88% white in 1950. Over the next 20 years, however, the proportion of the population that was African-American grew from 10% in 1950 to 70% in 1970. In less time than a typical 25-year law enforcement officer's career, the city went from a very small African-American population to a predominantly African-American population.

Figure 1. Compton, California Racial Demographic Changes 1930-2016



Data source: U.S. Census Bureau

The small Compton Police Department hired its first African-American police officer in 1958, and as the city grew, many more African-American officers and police chiefs were hired. Nevertheless, a common theme of protests in Compton during the 1960s, and through the early

¹ Henderson, B. (2014). *Ghetto Cops: On the Streets of the Most Dangerous City in America*. Menlo Park, CA: Henderson Publishing; Horne, G. (1997). *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s*. New York, NY: Da Capo Press; Scott, A. J. & Soja, E. (1996). *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

1990s, was that the police force was not representative of the predominantly African-American community it policed.² This lack of “representativeness” was due, however, to the speed at which the population changed and the fact that white officers, who were hired when the community was predominantly white, stayed until retirement.

Additional racial strife resulted in Compton during the late 1990s as the majority of city government positions became held by African-Americans by that time, but the Hispanic and Asian-American populations of the city blossomed exponentially. New Hispanics and Asian-American residents, who became the majority during the 2000s, were demanding representation in a local government dominated by African-American employees. This was one factor motivating the city to disband its predominantly African-American police force in 2000, and opting to contract with the Los Angeles County Sheriff Office (a more diverse agency) for police protection.³

Perry, Iowa

Compton serves as an example of large and swift racial demographic changes in a larger community within a metropolitan environment. What about small rural communities? Can the same thing happen there? Perry, Iowa is a small, rural town with a current population of about 7,700 inhabitants. It is located in Dallas county (population only 66,000), and is approximately 40 miles northwest of Des Moines. The primary industries in the town are farming and a pork processing plant.⁴ Figure 2 below illustrates that racial changes within Perry from 1950 through 2016.

From 1950 through the mid-1970s, the town was overwhelmingly white. In 1950 the town population was 98% white, and in 1970 the town population was still approximately 96% white. During that span of time the few members of racial minority groups residing in the town (less than 300 individuals) were African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Native Americans.

The 1980s and 1990s, however, saw major population changes that included an influx of Hispanic residents, primarily drawn to the community by jobs on farms and at the new pork processing plant. At the same time, Perry felt the nationwide increase of people leaving both urban and rural areas in favor of living in suburbia. While in past decades the majority of rural Americans lived almost their entire lives within the same community, the post-World War II era saw more and more rural young adults go off to college, never to return to the farm or small town. This era also saw the massive increase in the trend of retirees moving to places like Florida

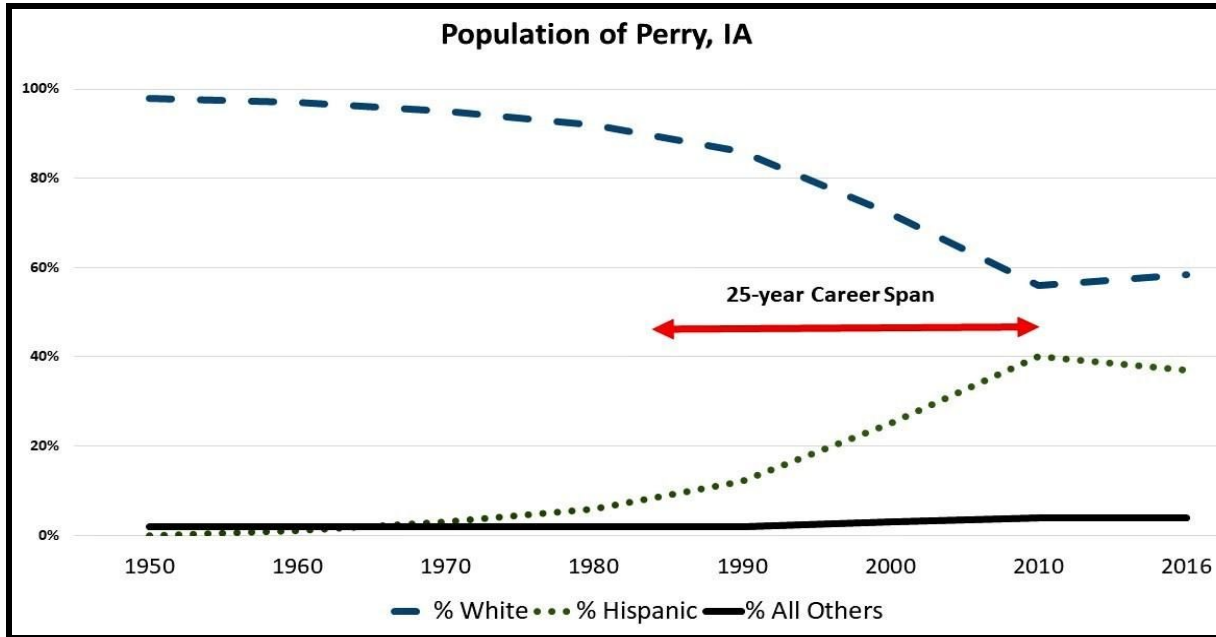
² Henderson (2014); Horne (1997).

³ Esquivel, P. (March 31, 2008). Compton feeling good: A shopping center with several national retail chains gives a self-esteem boost to a city branded as poor and crime-ridden. *Los Angeles Times*; Henderson (2014); Sewell, A. (September 9, 2010). Compton council fires city manager. *Los Angeles Times*.

⁴ U.S. Census Data.

or Arizona to live out their remaining years in warmer climates. As more whites left the community, new Hispanic residents moved in to fill the growing job vacancies.⁵

Figure 2. Perry, Iowa Racial Demographic Changes 1930-2016



All of these factors saw the small town's racial / ethnic population transform – especially rapidly during the 1990s and 2000s. In 1980 the town's population was still 93% white, but just 20 years later, in 2000, the town's population had changed to 72% white, 25% Hispanic, and 3% African-American, Asian-American, and Native American. In just 10 years after that, in 2010, the town was on the verge of becoming majority non-white, as 56% of inhabitants were white, 37% were Hispanic, and 4% were African-American, Asian-American, and Native American.

These are rapid changes that happened much more quickly than the standard rate of employee turnover on a police department. Note, however, that the pattern of change has continued, but in a different direction. Primarily due to economic factors, such as the sub-prime mortgage crisis and the Great Recession of 2008-2014, the Hispanic population has now been decreasing in Perry since 2009. The most current available Census data indicates that Perry's population was 59% white in 2017, a 3% increase over just 7 years. Again, the speed at which these racial demographic shifts can occur often are much faster than the rate of officer turnover on most police departments.

Conclusion

⁵ Baxandall, R. & Ewen, E. (2000). *Picture Windows: How The Suburbs Happened*. New York, NY: Basic Books; Jackson, K. T. (1985). *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; Mozingo, L. (2011). *Pastoral Capitalism: A History of Suburban Corporate Landscapes*. Boston, MA: MIT Press.

The racial composition of a police force or fire department is a highly complex issue, far more complicated than protestors, politicians, or the media seem to understand. One important facet of this many-sided issue is the influence a rapid change in racial demographics can have. *Communities legally cannot, and ethically should not, get rid of existing employees just because their race or ethnicity does not match that of the majority of the majority of individuals who reside within the city or town.* If one group rises to a majority or supermajority in a short period of time, it will take decades for the hiring of new employees and retiring of existing employees to mirror that change. By that time, as was the case in Compton, the racial composition of the community may have shifted again.

What is most important in evaluating the fairness of a hiring process is to ask: *what is the agency doing right now?* If a mostly-white law enforcement agency has officer vacancies, and a non-white segment of the population has grown substantially in recent years, that department should make a strong effort to recruit new officers from members of the growing population group. Public safety agencies should also try to hire qualified individuals from a diverse array of backgrounds, and the deeply American value of equal opportunity should drive agencies to avoid excluding qualified applicants from specific race, ethnic, gender, or sexual orientation demographic groups. Having an expectation that the racial demographic composition of all police or fire departments should perfectly mirror the racial composition of the community at all times is often unrealistic, however, and ignores the realities of legitimate constraints of public safety hiring.

Contact Us for Research Services

If your law enforcement or fire service agency is facing concerns that the racial or ethnic composition of its personnel do not match the demographic composition of the community, then we encourage you to [contact us](#) about the research services available to you. [We provide research consulting services](#) on this issue that can include examining recent population and economic shifts in the community. We also can examine how the racial and ethnic composition of the community may differ from the racial and ethnic composition of the pool of individuals in the local area who meet the most basic qualifications for employment by your agency (i.e., meets the age, education, citizenship, language proficiency, and employability requirements of your agency). Make sure your agency has the solid facts when responding to these community concerns.