

# Report cites barriers to more diverse police departments

A federal government report says a lack of trust in law enforcement and burdensome hiring requirements are among the barriers to creating more diverse police agencies

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By ERIC TUCKER, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A lack of trust in law enforcement and burdensome hiring criteria are among the barriers to creating more diverse police agencies, according to a federal report Wednesday.

The report, from the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division and the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, examines the challenges to diversity in law enforcement and singles out individual agencies it says have taken innovative steps to encourage the recruitment of minority officers. It suggests that police departments eager for a more diverse workforce should be open to hiring applicants with past drug use or criminal records instead of automatically screening them out.

The lack of diversity among law enforcement agencies has become an urgent concern in recent years amid signs of strained relations between police departments and minority communities.

A scathing Justice Department report last year on the police department in Ferguson, Missouri, raised concerns that the police force was overwhelmingly white even though the city was majority black. The Obama administration's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, meanwhile, recommended that agencies promote diversity in race, gender and cultural background as a path toward better relationships with their communities.

"One of the issues that can have a big impact on (trust) is whether law enforcement agencies reflect the communities they serve, whether they look like the communities they serve," Deputy Attorney General Sally Q. Yates said Wednesday in announcing the report's release.

The report cites a 2013 survey from the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics showing that racial or ethnic minorities make up about 27 percent of full-time sworn officers in the more than 12,000 local police departments across the country. That percentage, though higher than it was 30 years ago, still means that minorities are underrepresented in law enforcement in many communities, the report said. And while the lack of diversity is especially acute in small-town police agencies, the problem is not limited to those departments, officials say.

"Our own federal agencies, our own DOJ agencies, are not nearly as diverse as they could be," Yates said, echoing remarks from FBI Director James Comey, who has described the lack of diversity in his own agency as a "crisis."

The report acknowledges that minorities may be deterred from joining their police forces because of strained relations, a lack of trust in law enforcement, an application process that screens out individuals who might otherwise be qualified — such as through credit checks or questions about past drug use — and a promotion process that can put minorities at a disadvantage.

The report praises the police in Richmond, California, for following up with applicants when a drug issue arises rather than automatically disqualifying them. It also singles out the police department in Beaufort, South Carolina, for creating partnerships with local academic and military institutions as well as for hiring an officer from the Dominican Republic and paying for English classes to help him improve his language skills.

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