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Area law enforcement agencies confront challenge of diversifying departments

Megan Rodriguez

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Michael Miller/The Eagle

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At the end of August, the Rev. Sylvester Smith Jr. led the invocation for 13 graduates from the Bryan Police Department Police Academy. He noticed that none of the incoming officers were Black.

Smith, a Black pastor in Bryan's New Zion Missionary Baptist Church and a Bryan Police Department chaplain of 17 years, said there needs to be more officers of color in the Bryan-College Station area.

"I believe that your officers ought to look like the demographic of the city in the community of where they are working at," he said. "When you have someone that they can relate to and may be of the same ethnicity, there seems to be a little bit more trust."

The lack of diversity is an issue that local law enforcement officials said they have been trying to tackle for years. Some are concerned that national events including the police custody death of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May and protests calling for police reform hurt law enforcement's ability to attract diverse applicants.

Other community leaders said the relationship between the police and people of color is strong, but they welcome further improvements.

Local demographics

Twenty-three of the 469 sworn members across the Bryan, College Station and Texas A&M police departments and the Brazos County Sheriff's Office are Black. Nine of those are in the Bryan and College Station departments.

Five members of the Bryan Police Department's 156-member sworn force are Black, while 125 are white. Twenty-two are Hispanic or Latino, with the remaining few falling into other categories. This means 3.2% of the force is Black, while census data shows that Bryan's African American population sits at 16.2%. Additionally, 14.1% of the force is Hispanic, while 39.5% of the city's population is made up of Hispanic people. The force is 80.1% white; the city is 40.2% white.

In College Station, four officers are Black, 121 are white, 14 are Hispanic or Latino with the rest of the 146 officers from different minority groups. The city's demographic makeup includes 7.7% Black people and 15.6% Hispanic people, while the police department's force stands at 2.7% and 9.6%, respectively. The department's data shows that it is 82.9% white, while the city is 64.5% white.

The Brazos County Sheriff's Office is closer to reflecting the county's population with 12 — or 11.7% — of its sworn employees being Black, compared to 11.2% of people in the county.

Additionally, 24, or 23.3%, of sworn employees are Hispanic compared to 26.2% of the county population. Sixty-seven, or 65%, of the 103 sworn employees are white, versus the county's 55.2%.

The Texas A&M University Police Department operates with 64 officers: 51, or 79.7%, are white; two, or 3.1%, are Black; and nine, or 14.1%, are Hispanic. The faculty, staff and student population at A&M is made up of 3.4% Black people and 20.4% Hispanic people, according to fall and fiscal year 2019 demographic data from A&M. The campus community is 56.6% white.



Bryan Police Department veteran Dean Swartzlander sworn in as assistant chief

Efforts to diversify

The disparity between the city of Bryan's demographic makeup and the police department's is not due to a lack of trying, Assistant Chief Dean Swartzlander said.

Prior to moving to his role as assistant chief, Swartzlander spent a decade taking different approaches to recruiting in an effort to make the Bryan Police Department better represent the city's population.

"I think it pays dividends if the demographics of the department match the demographics of the city," he said. "I think people are a lot more comfortable talking to the same demographic from the community that works for PD, as far as in the Hispanic community and Black community. I think there's more trust there probably, especially now with what's going on nationally."

Recruitment efforts in local police departments branch beyond the Bryan-College Station area and into universities that have criminal justice programs and diverse student populations, including Sam Houston State University, Prairie View A&M and Houston Baptist University.

About five years ago, Swartzlander helped form a group of minority community members to guide the department in finding ways to bring in more diverse officers. Swartzlander said the group recommended targeting middle and high school students so they could grow up thinking of policing as a potential career option and understanding that getting in trouble or using drugs could prevent them from being in the field.

Taking that suggestion, the department formed a Junior Citizens Police Academy, started attending a youth job fair and made presentations in local schools.

Swartzlander said time will tell whether that pays off when the students turn 21 and can begin applying to be an officer.

Overall, the best recruitment tool is stories that officers share with others about how much they enjoy working in law enforcement, University Police Chief Mike Johnson said.

While recruitment efforts are geared, in some cases, toward finding more minority applicants, all local law enforcement officials said a person's race is not considered during the hiring process.

At a summer panel that brought together community leaders to discuss local law enforcement concerns, Bryan Chief Eric Buske said the number of Black applicants has risen recently, but that it has not led to more hires.



Brazos County Sheriff Chris Kirk

New perspectives and added trust

Johnson, who is Black and has been at the University Police Department for 25 years, said a diverse group of people can provide the organization with a wider variety of perspectives and analysis when decisions are made.

Diverse officers bring helpful backgrounds to the force, College Station Police Chief Billy Couch said. For example, he said, policing a Black area of the community is easier when there are officers with racial understanding of the community.

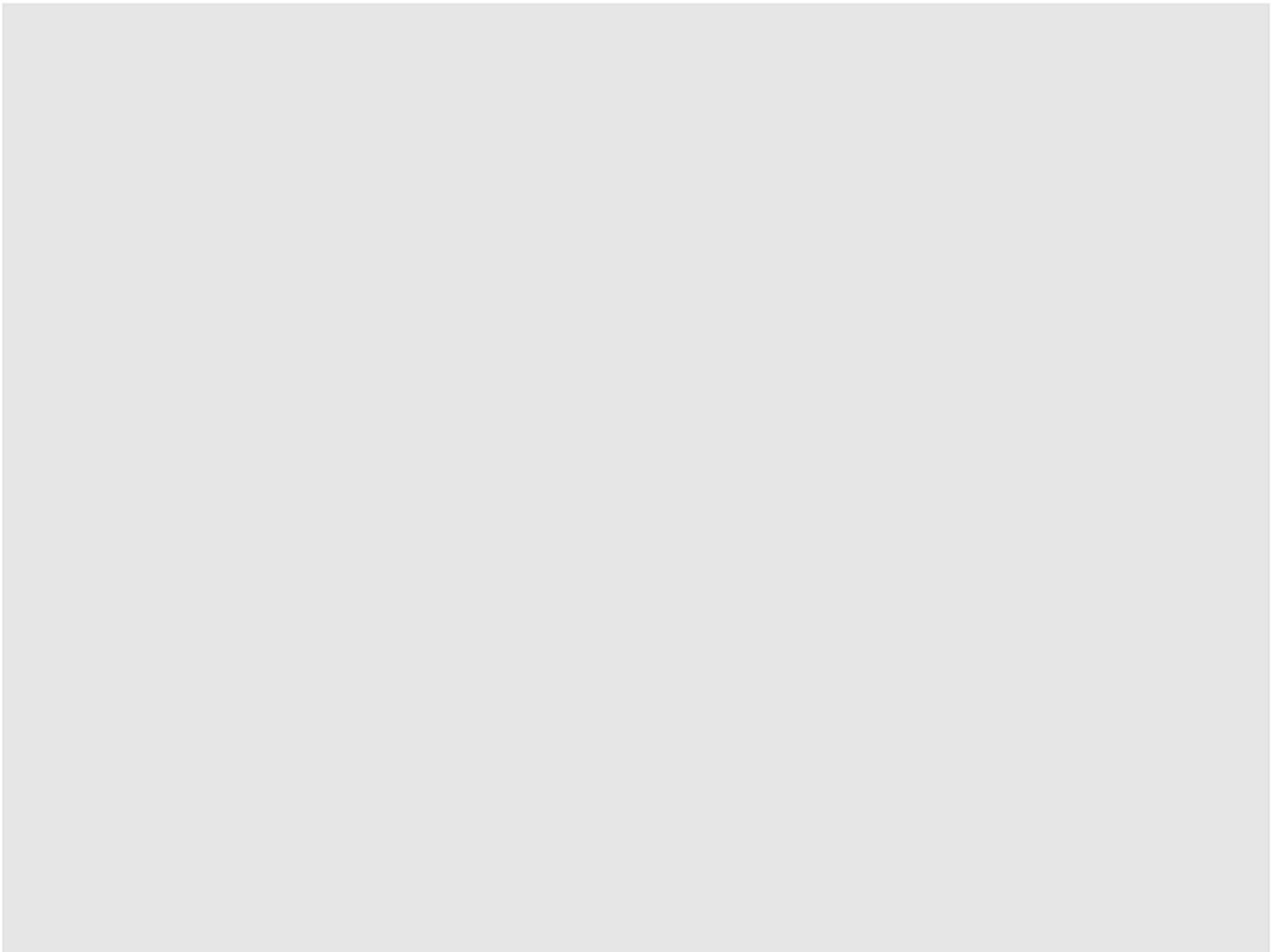
But he said he sees a stigma within minority communities against people joining the police force, an issue he said is not helped by negative national news coverage related to police.

Swartzlander said attracting minority applicants to the policing profession has been a challenge.

“I’m just assuming that, based on what we’re seeing nationwide, that there’s some trust issues there and people are not wanting to get into the career field based on those trust issues,” he said. “We’re going to have to break down those barriers if we’re going to make the demographics of the PD match the demographics of the city.”

Couch said the department does all it can to get applications into the hands of minorities, ensure that the department’s application processes are not unfairly hurting their chances to be on the force and promoting the industry as a noble profession. He said residents also play a critical role and can help reduce the stigma by encouraging younger generations to join the policing profession.

“I think the community holds all the power,” he said.



Tough questions: Community police chiefs discuss race relations

Studying the impact of diversity

Texas A&M economics professor Mark Hoekstra led a recently published study that found that white officers use force 60% more often than Black officers. Additionally, his study revealed that white officers are more likely to use force than nonwhite officers, especially in minority neighborhoods.

Other research has concluded that race isn't much of a factor when it comes to use of force, Hoekstra said, but those studies focused on situations in which police initiated contact with the public or only review times when force was used. Hoekstra said his three-year study used data from millions of 911 calls in two major U.S. cities but did not determine if the reason for the patterns come from racial bias, how skilled or unskilled white officers are in de-escalating situations, or the way that civilians respond.

Hoekstra said when high-profile incidents like Floyd's death happen, many assume that it is a "one-off thing," but he said that it's a systemic problem hasn't been resolved.

"But when we look systematically across, in our case, all 911 calls over several years, and all officers who are responding to those calls, we see that race matters in a systematic way," he said. "I think that should at least raise the possibility in the minds of police leaders that this could also matter where you're at, and it could matter in a systematic way, not just one or two guys."

In a recent **Bloomberg opinion piece** about how to make a police force more diverse, Texas A&M associate economics professor Jennifer Doleac said there is research showing that white officers are more lenient toward white civilians than toward Black civilians. In the piece, she also points to Hoekstra's study about white officers being quicker to use force against civilians in Black neighborhoods.

Texas A&M University names J. Mike Johnson as new police chief

Doleac is the director of Justice Tech Lab, which focuses on answering policy-related questions about crime and discrimination.

In an interview, Doleac said she is never surprised to see studies that indicate racial bias since “almost every study of racial discrimination in any context in American society, there’s evidence that people exhibited bias.”

“We should be shocked if we don’t see it in policing,” she said, “because these are human beings interacting often in very high-stress situations.”



Brazos County leaders address law enforcement concerns during panel discussion

Even though the two studies were not conducted in the Bryan-College Station area, meaning the local situation may be different, she said there isn't a reason that the research would "be unrepresentative of a place like our local community."

Diversifying a police force can influence a city, Doleac said, citing additional studies that have documented such impacts. One study showed that having more Black officers reduced Black victimization rates. Another suggested that additional women on the force led to higher likelihood of domestic violence reporting and, in turn, intimate partner homicide rates and reports of non-fatal domestic abuse dropped.

Reflections from time on the force

Demond Oliver had a 22-year career at the Bryan Police Department, retiring in 2018 as a sergeant with two medals of valor. Today, he works in Bryan for New York Life Insurance Co.

A diverse police force can be beneficial, said Oliver, who is Black. He said a diverse force means that officers can regularly interact with and learn from people who are different from themselves.

“As a police officer, it’s easy for us to paint this side of town or this community or these people with a broad brush,” Oliver said. “With diversity in the department, you may think about the officer that you work with and his family, and treat people as individuals and not as one ethnic group.”

But ensuring that departments reflect the demographics of a community is not the solution to everything, he said, noting that he believes departments across the country struggle with groupthink. As an example, he pointed to discussions he’s seen in relation to Breonna Taylor — who was fatally shot by police in Louisville, Kentucky — in which people have defended the officers. He said it highlights a core problem in which many police don’t want to admit when departments are incorrect.

“Even if the department was diverse and equally reflected the community, but everybody has this mentality that it’s us against the world and we don’t make mistakes ... if that is still the case, it wouldn’t matter if the department reflected the community or not,” Oliver said. “Somebody has to be willing to step up and say we were wrong on that one.”

Billy Couch named College Station police chief

Community connections

Events like George Floyd’s death and national protests calling for police reform have made way for local conversations about policing.

Black Lives Matter BCS co-founders Tre Watson and Ebony Peterson led peaceful demonstrations this summer, bringing together hundreds who stood to honor Floyd. The two said they were happy with the way law enforcement reacted to the events, and that conversations with department leaders make them feel like officials are open to listening.

Swartzlander said policing the protests — two of which were held in Bryan — during the summer went well. It was a chance for conversations, he said, as some protesters prayed with officers or asked their opinions about Floyd's death.

National events have also sparked internal conversations, law enforcement officials said.

“It is quite obvious that there are firmly held beliefs,” Brazos County Sheriff Chris Kirk said. “And anybody that’s in law enforcement, this organization included, if they’re not listening, they need to be. We need to be assessing the service we’re providing. In this case, I am confident that we provide a service that is not biased in any fashion. I actually believe that goes county wide.”

Local law enforcement leaders said they feel like their relations with communities of color are strong.

Smith, who has lived in the area for about two decades, said he has seen the relationship between police and minorities improve throughout the years. Seeing police chiefs and officers engaged in conversations about current concerns is especially beneficial. In June, Smith helped organize a prayer event among pastors, officers and area leaders to denounce racism.

In Watson and Peterson's eyes, the relationship has been good, but they stressed a desire for community policing — a strategy among law enforcement that focuses on building connections and working closely with community members. Peterson said this could be accomplished, in part, through more efforts to have officers introduce themselves to residents of the areas they patrol.

Additionally, they said, there is room for improvement when it comes to diversifying departments.

Tackling the issue is a challenge, said Watson, noting that there are places where the dynamic between minorities and the police is poor and could discourage many people of color from wanting to join the force. But officers connecting with young kids in the areas they serve and talking to them about how law enforcement can help them, rather than just being there when something is going wrong, can go a long way.

Watson said diversifying law enforcement should be a top priority to local leaders.

“Representation totally matters,” he said.

Gallery: Black Lives Matter B/CS's "Love, Peace, & Protest" draws hundreds

Black Lives Matter

