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# Most police departments in San Diego County are more White than the communities they serve, data show



In this 2019 file photo, a group of new police academy graduates listen to San Diego police Chief David Nisleit (near the right, holding a piece of paper) at a graduation ceremony at MCAS Miramar. Standing on Nisleit's left is San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer. (Courtesy of the City of San Diego)

## Improvements are being made, but progress is slow and sometimes inconsistent

By LYND SAY WINKLEY, LAUREN J. MAPP

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When San Diego police Sgt. Harold Oliver was growing up in Southeastern San Diego in the 1970s, seeing a Black police officer was a rare occurrence.

It was so rare that he may not have considered a job in law enforcement had he not looked up to an uncle who worked as an officer at UC San Diego. Oliver is now the president of the Black Police

Officers Association San Diego Chapter. During his 23 years with the department, he's seen the community of officers around him become more and more diverse. It's an effort that has made big strides in recent years, Oliver said.

But there's still a lot of work to be done, data show.

Amid a national reckoning over a lack of diversity at institutions across the country, nearly every law enforcement agency in San Diego County is more White than the communities they serve.

Ten of 11 local law enforcement agencies have a greater percentage of White officers than White residents, data show. The size of that gap varies by department but, on average, local departments were about 22 percent more White than their communities.

Agencies in cities with large White populations were the most representative. Carlsbad's police force is about 77.5 percent White, only a few percentage points above the city's White population, which

sits at 74 percent. Coronado, where about 75 percent of the population is White, is home to the only police department in the county with a slightly smaller proportion of White officers when compared to the city it serves.

Departments are least representative in cities with small White populations.

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**Other countries**  
**Prospective tracing**  
Beginning with newly confirmed cases (●), close contacts (○) are identified and monitored for symptoms. This method was used in the SARS outbreak.

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In National City, Chula Vista and Escondido, where White residents account for between 12 and 36 percent of the population, the proportion of White officers is more than 30 percent higher than each of their communities.

Overall, local departments are least representative of Asian and Latino populations.

Only police departments in Coronado and Carlsbad have an equal or greater percentage of Latino officers when compared to the

population. The county Sheriff's Department is nearly representative, with 34 percent of the community and 32 percent of officers identifying as Latino.

Three cities — Coronado, El Cajon and Oceanside — have departments that are representative of their community's Asian population.

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For many community and police leaders, diversity is the bedrock of trust and cooperation. Police officers who share the experience of their community are likely to have a better understanding of its residents. That shared perspective can have a positive effect on everything from day-to-day interactions to crime fighting to policy shaping. Diversifying police departments can also help underrepresented communities better see themselves in law enforcement, and perhaps fuel a desire to don their own badge one day.

“When we bring in people who have diverse perspectives and backgrounds and experiences they're also going to foster a different

way of communicating,” said Geneviève Jones-Wright, co-founder of Community Advocates for Just and Moral Governance. “That’s when we see change. That’s when we see policies and practices improve so that we can better the relationship between law enforcement and community members.”

Over the years, most departments in San Diego County have participated in the Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics survey, which collects police demographic information from agencies across the country.

The results of that survey show that local departments are more diverse than they used to be, but progress is slow and, at times, inconsistent.

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For example, the San Diego County Sheriff’s Department is less White now than it was more than a decade ago, but only by about 8

percentage points. In 2007, about 62 percent of deputies identified as White, compared to about 54 percent in 2020.

But between 2013 and 2016, the number of White officers actually increased at the department.

The Oceanside Police Department is also less White than it was in 2007 — 65 percent of officers identify as White now, down from about 70 percent. However, the department saw an increase in the number of White officers and a decrease in the number of officers of color between 2016 and 2020.

Over the years, many police departments across the county have gotten steadily more diverse. Some are even setting new diversity records.

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Police Lt. Steve Waldheim oversees the San Diego Police Department's background and recruiting department. He said for the first time in

the department’s history, just over 50 percent of the officers hired in 2020 were people of color. The department’s academy class slated for January is also the most diverse class in department history with 64 percent of recruits identifying as people of color.

### Change in share of officers, 2013 to 2020

Percent change in share of non-White officers by race. Across San Diego County, most departments added more Hispanic officers from 2013 to 2020.

Department	Hispanic	Black	Asian
San Diego	6.1%	-0.4%	4.2%
Sheriff	6.8%	-1.0%	0.4%
Chula Vista	3.3%	4.3%	1.4%
El Cajon	5.5%	0.8%	2.3%
Escondido	1.9%	1.5%	0.0%
National City	8.8%	-1.0%	0.4%
La Mesa	4.6%	2.0%	2.0%
Oceanside	7.0%	0.0%	5.4%

Note: Carlsbad Police Department, Coronado Police Department and Harbor Police Department did not provide data in 2013.

Source: U-T Research

Daniel Wheaton U-T

“We want the community’s trust. We want them to know we’re here to help them —that we’re a part of the community, too,” Waldheim said. “So I think it’s very important, crucial, that we are representative of those we serve. We’ve definitely made strides.”

Rashawn Ray, a policing expert at the Brookings Institution, reviewed police demographic data compiled by The San Diego Union-Tribune.

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Ray said the pattern seen in local police demographics echoes what his research has found across the nation: an underrepresentation of officers of color compared to the populations that they serve.

In many cases over the past decade, however, departments have made conscious efforts to hire more equitably, he said.

More diversity within police departments helps to shift the culture within them, meaning policies can become more inclusive as officers of color teach White officers about cultural norms, according to Ray. That in turn has an impact on key equity issues, like use of force.

“Part of that cultural shifting deals with who is perceived as a threat versus not,” Ray said. “Black people’s bodies, Brown people’s bodies are more likely to be viewed as a threat.”

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“Blackness becomes weaponized — even when a Black person doesn’t have a weapon, it’s perceived that we might. It is perceived that our physical bodies could cause harm.”

But more changes are needed to increase interest in law enforcement careers for people of color, especially among children within the community, Ray said.

Several department leaders said a lack of diversity among applicants is one of their biggest struggles. Most of the people who try to become police officers are White men, they said.

This has prompted across-the-board changes to recruiting methods.

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In El Cajon, police leaders reach out to high schools to encourage students to participate in their youth cadet program, which is considered to be a sort of training ground for future officers.

Graham Mitchell, El Cajon's city manager, said the program has led to several hires of employees who are of Middle Eastern descent, a particularly impactful addition in a city with a large Iraqi Chaldean population.

San Diego police Lt. Waldheim said his department has held a number of events that were specifically designed to attract candidates of color. They've gone to Florida A&M, a historically Black university in Tallahassee and have run ads in the Voice and Viewpoint, an African American publication in San Diego. They've manned recruiting booths at career fairs in Barrio Logan and at the Malcolm X Library in the Southeastern San Diego community of Valencia Park.

At the Sheriff's Department, deputies are asked why they joined the department — and why they have stayed — and everyone is encouraged to recruit from their communities, as word-of-mouth referrals have been one of the most successful recruiting tactics.

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The department also created focus groups to help recruit more military veterans, women and members of the Latino community, and has partnered with both the NAACP and Black church leaders through the local nonprofit organization Pastors on Point San Diego. Outreach is also conducted at community events, such as festivals within the Asian and Pacific Islander communities.

To reach more people in the Latino community, the department will soon conduct outreach in Spanish instead of solely in English, and they're looking to hire more people from San Diego's Arabic-speaking communities.

“We can't rest on our laurels, we can't say that what we did was fine and we're good,” said San Diego County Assistant Sheriff Anthony Ray, who oversees the human resources and court services bureaus. “We decided that we need to do more collaboration, more community outreach to ensure that we continue to reflect the communities that we serve.”

He added that the department is working on a new selection process with psychologists to identify those who are the best possible candidates for a career in law enforcement. The current system merely screens candidates out when they don't meet minimum standards.

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Designing recruiting events to attract candidates of color is important, but those efforts may not be effective if officers in the field fail to build meaningful relationships with the communities they're trying to attract.

Ray, with the Brookings Institution, said it's imperative that officers and community members work together frequently — not just after a crisis.

“Part of the problem is that typically police and community are coming together to talk about something after something bad has happened,” Ray said. “Well, all you're trying to do at that point is healing an open wound.

“What you have to do is when the wound is already healed, you have to make the relationship stronger.”

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Junior police academy programs, having officers visit classrooms as guest speakers and field trips to police departments can help children to see law enforcement as helpers. Ray said this may inspire their career paths later in life.

“These sorts of things start to expose them so that as they get older, particularly for Black and Latino kids, some of their first interactions with police officers aren’t negative,” Ray said. “Instead they’ve had a series of more positive interactions that can help to offset a negative experience that they might have.”

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