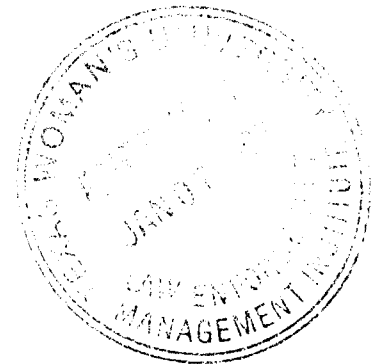LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN POLICE OFFICER:

COPING WITH THE OCCUPATION

A RESEARCH PAPER

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT

OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR

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BY

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#153

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to try to offer managers some explanation why there are so few African-Americans in law enforcement. The major goal will be to identify structural and procedural barriers endured by the African-American officer.

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I.   INTRODUCTION

Even today, after many positive steps, the problem of inequality has not been resolved. Nevertheless, many African-Americans want to participate in a profession, requires possible risk to life and limb, for a society that resists their authority. How is the African-American police officer perceived by the public and fellow white officers? This is an important issue that needs addressing throughout the country.

Presently, the police department in which this researcher is employed is composed of 157 sworn police officers. Of this number, 3% are African-Americans. The estimated population of the City of Midland is about 100,000 with approximately 7.6% African-American population.

II.   LAW ENFORCEMENT DEFINED

To adequately address the effect of discriminatory treatment of African-American police officers on the job, one must first know the nature of the occupation and what duties it involves. The phrase <u>law enforcement</u> relates directly to a uniformed police officer, or to police activities in the community.[1] The blanket term <u>law enforcement officer</u> refers to those persons employed to enforce the law and to maintain order at several levels of government. The term <u>police</u> usually refers to the law enforcement personnel at the municipal level.[2] The police, who have the responsibility for dealing with crime on a twenty-four hour basis, are usually visible to the public and are they who immediately respond when violations of the law occur.[3] Formal police authority is

based primarily upon statutory law that gives the police the authority to arrest.[4] Police power and action cannot conflict with the rights of the individual. Individual rights include such liberties as freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly, petition, and due process of law.[5]

III.   THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN POLICE OFFICER

The African-American who joins a police force is subject to all the tensions and conflicts that arise from police work. Moreover, the conflict is compounded for the African-Americans. Their identity is confused because they must act as guardians of a dominate racial group even though they are the minority race. They may find it necessary to defend their service as police officers and explain it largely on the basis of economic necessity this was one of the best paying jobs that was available. Often, they feel that they are subject to criticism by their ethnic peers, derived from premises inapplicable to the situation, that is, peers may consider them traitors to their race because that race does not benefit from the protection that they offer. Yet, they may defend their race because they are inextricably bound up in the race's struggle for civil rights and the demands of the race for social and legal equality. It is difficult for African-American officers to play both roles. To be a racial minority and a police officer is to be subject to double marginality and to some special problems.[6]

IV.   OBJECTIVES

If Anglo police officers experience work/family spill-over, what about African-American officers? They not only experience standard work conditions, but they must deal with the hidden discriminations against their race. They may unknowingly internalize the bruises to their self-esteem.[7]

African-Americans began entering law enforcement in the early 1970's and were often unwanted newcomers to police departments. African-American officers may experience more job stressors than the average Anglo officer. The majority of officers (of all races) expressed concern over the limited opportunities of job advancement. Litigation by African-American police officers across the United States testifies to their perception of unequal access to jobs and discrimination mistreatment within the work place.

Both inside and outside police departments, African-Americans may find a cool reception when invoking their authority as law enforcers. They exhibit ego-defensive behavior which may manifest itself in a variety of ways (e.g., acting tougher than they feel), or they experience resentment, prejudice, and discrimination from higher status groups. Fear of harmful consequences to self may inhibit reactions to perceived mistreatment. More present than discrimination are the non-hostile withdrawals or "psychological distancing" between those African-American and Anglo officers who have not previously experienced interracial contact. This distancing may be expressed through ethnic jokes or confining

interracial interactions to only job-related tasks. This
creates a defensive withdrawal on the part of the officer.
Such interactions provide ample reasons for African-American
officers to feel that they are unwelcome.[8]

> I can recall first going to work for the police
> department in my city. At that time, there were
> only three black officers employed. I was the
> newest and youngest of the three. Telling ethnic
> jokes, 'nigger jokes' as they were commonly called,
> were everyday occurrence. I felt like it was
> something I had to listen to and laugh at in order
> to keep my job and to feel as part of the team.
> Besides, the older black officers had been subject
> to it a lot longer than I had. Not once did any of
> the white officers ask my feelings in the matter.
> In some instances, some supervisors were worse than
> their subordinates.

The results from a survey of police officers suggests
approximately 67.6 % have experienced adverse treatment on the
job.[9] African-American officers were found to be signifi-
cantly more likely to perceive annoying or unfair treatment
than white officers. Responses to several survey questions
reflected that African-Americans, more often than their Anglo
colleagues, felt that: (a) they were informally barred from
certain assignments because of their race; (b) other officers
tried to intimidate them; (c) unwanted racial jokes were made
in their presence; (d) compared to others, they were more apt
to be penalized for their mistakes; (e) the actions of other
officers of their race affected how they themselves were
judged; and (f) they were closely watched by their department.
No doubt these perceptions tend to increase individual stress
and decrease feelings of acceptance, making a African-American
officers' work lives more difficult.[10] African-American

police officers not only have to deal with the work-load
conflict which comes with the job, but also with the added
burden of being viewed as outsiders within a closed and
sometimes hostile occupational environment.[11]

V.   PROBLEMS OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN POLICE OFFICER

No matter how severe the pressures that befall any
police officer, they must be dwarfed by the pressures faced by
any minority officer.   Minority (and including female)
officers are subject to all the personal problems that face
the Anglo male officer.   The special and severe forces with
which all minorities additionally contend are rather obvious.
In many police agencies, a minority police officer is regarded
suspiciously by fellow officers and does not have the kind of
peer support that most officers identify as critically
important.   Further, minority officers may face occasional
bigotry from the dominate racial community even when they are
responding with emergency service.   Parenthetically, it is
interesting to note that it is widely believed that African-
American officers receive more hostility from the African-
American community than do Anglo officers.   African-American
officers contend that this is almost completely a myth, and
that they are, with occasional exceptions, received more
positively than are Anglo officers.   However, African-American
officers are much more likely to find that their job is a
source of harassment and unpleasantness for their families
than it is for the Anglo officer.[12]

Many African-American officers were merely products of the police department and acted accordingly. "Whites beat Blacks because they're racist and Blacks beat BLACKS because they want to keep their jobs."[13] African-American police officers have become a particular target to militants in the inner city where they are referred to as "Toms" and "tools of white oppressors." In New Orleans, New York and other cities, African-American militants have targeted African-American officers for assassination.[14]

> Some black officers, on occasion, take on the same mode as White officers by beating on black folks, trying to be one of the boys. [15]

Many departments would deny that such a problem exists. This researcher has been employed with the Midland Police Department since 1976, and was promoted to the rank of detective sergeant in 1981. This was during the time before the department started administering promotional examinations, and all promotions were by appointments and recommendations. Several days after the 1981 promotion, this researcher was approached by a veteran lieutenant who offered his congratulations on the promotion. During the conversation, he asked for an opinion about the reasons that none of the older, veteran African-American officers had been promoted. His own opinion:

> well, the reason I feel like they were not promoted was because when they started working here, they [black officers] mistreated their own race of people just to show us [the white officers] that they were okay.

While many in managerial positions would deny the existence of institutional racism, evidence of its presence can be witnessed in many races. The estimated metropolitan population of Midland is approximately 100,000 with 7.6% African-American population. The following statistics are representitive only of the Police Department within the City of Midland.

1. Of the total 157 City of Midland police officers, only 5 are African-American and 21 are Hispanic.

2. No African-American officers have ever retired from the Midland Police Department. All have resigned or have been terminated.

3. Of the 43 supervisory positions available within the department (sergeant and above), presently only 1 is held by an African-American and 5 are held by Hispanics.

VI.   POLICE MINORITY RECRUITMENT

If American policing is to prosper in the twenty-first century, officials must plan today to address the problems of tomorrow. Police managers must begin to recruit qualified individuals who can lead departments successfully into the next century.

However, rapid changes in demographics can make the problem of recruitment even more difficult. According to Trojanowicz and Carter, "by 2010, more than one-third of all American children will be Black, Hispanic, or Asian." The Caucasian majority of today will become a minority within America in less than 100 years. Obviously, this change in society will have a tremendous impact on the recruiting process of the future.[16]

Changing demographics may force the correction of this problem in the near future. During the next ten years, only one out of four who enter the work force will be a white male. The rest will be either women or other minorities. Recognizing this, police executives can plan recruiting strategies now that will ensure that they get the most qualified individuals for their department.[17]

Departments should develop programs aimed at changing traditional ethnic community attitudes of law enforcement careers. Some ethnic groups that have recently arrived in this country have brought with them fear and distrust of police. Because of this, they choose not to enter police work. Police managers must work to change this attitude if they hope to recruit from these ethnic groups.[18]

Data on citizen satisfaction with the police were excerpted from a 1968 study of citizen attitudes, which included 2,984 African-American respondents. (Information is not provided on methods for collecting data on the two variables.) In general, African-American satisfaction with police protection was found to be low. There was a moderately strong positive relationship between positive perceptions and the per capita ratio of minority police to minority citizens. Relative minority recruitment efforts had a little impact on citizen perceptions of police protection. The lack of a strong relationship between the presence of African-Americans on the police force and positive attitudes toward the police among African-Americans denies the idea that perceptions of

African-American officers are barriers to the African-American's confidence in the police. The data may have failed to reveal a significant relationship in this area because organizational barriers undermine African-American police officers' effectiveness in responding to the needs of African-American citizens, or because the data assessed only overall evaluations of the police. It may also be that the African-American police officers fail to translate their understanding of their own culture into action.[19]

Despite the data limitations of the study, it is apparent that the employment of minorities as police officers has increased steadily since 1940. Using the criterion of proportional employment (minorities shall be employed in proportion to their number in the population), African-Americans were not proportionally represented in police ranks by 1970, but in the 1960's they were being employed at a rate (14.78%) of growth higher than their numbers in the population. Strategies of discrimination used against African-American police have historically included discrimination in appointments, testing procedures, promotions, duty assignments, area assignments, efficiency ratings, use of departmental facilities, treatment by supervisors, arrest powers and salaries. By the mid-1960's the organizational practices of overt discrimination had been altered but replaced by the overt and covert discrimination of some individual officers. Compared to the effectiveness of Anglo police officers in their treatment of African-American

citizens, African-American police performance may be an improvement, although one study (Reiss, 1977) has concluded that both Anglo and African-American officers are more likely to use force unduly against citizens of their own race. The increasing impetus for minority police employment resulting from affirmative action after the 1960's may show more of a concern for equality in employment than improved excellence in police performance. Excellence in performance must be the final goal of police recruitment and training if citizens are to receive the quality of police services they require.[20]
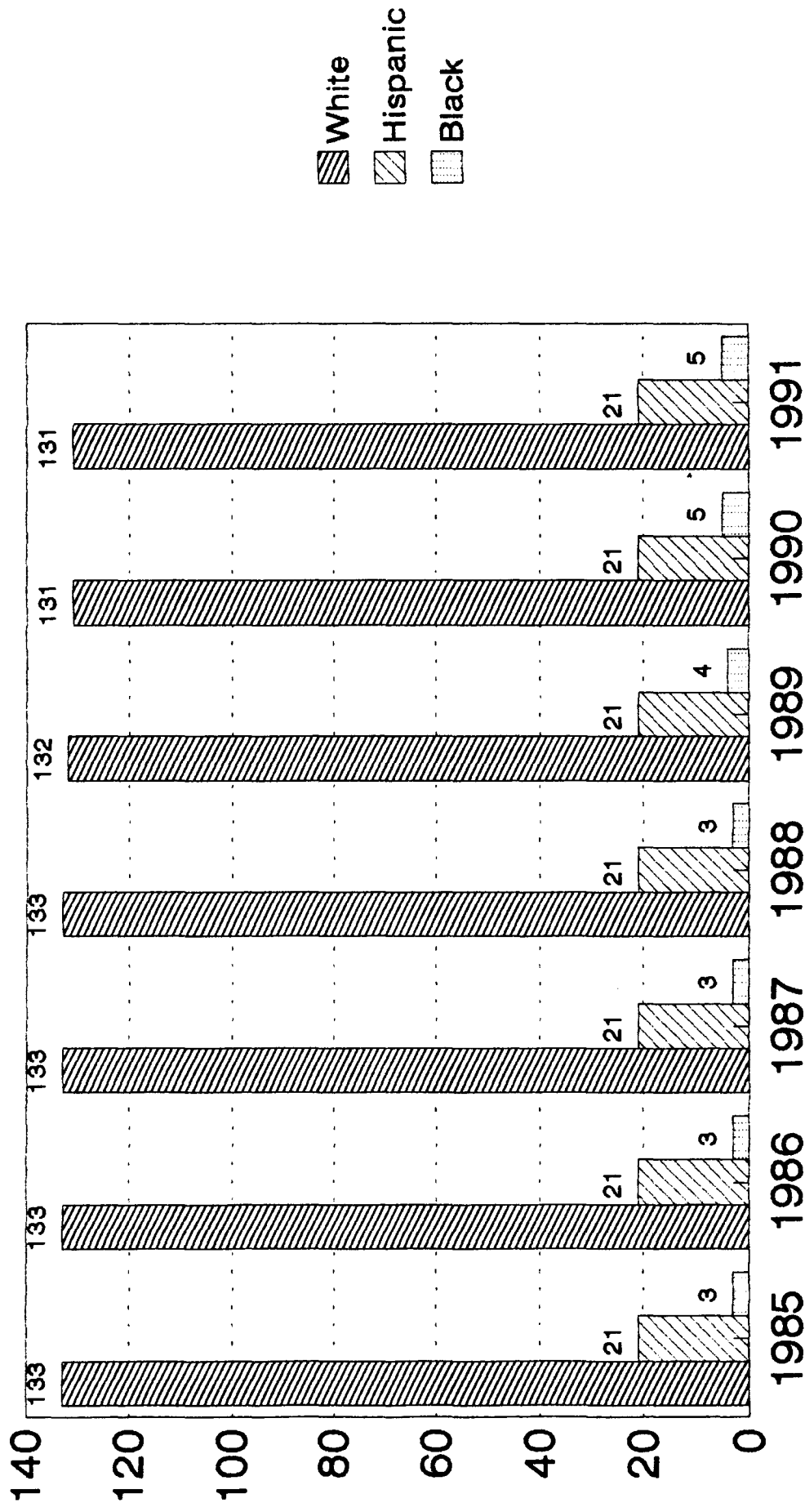
VII.   GRAPHIC DISPLAYS

The following graphs show the ethnic breakdown of certified personnel of the Midland Police Department. The graphs are to help illustrate the difference in employment between the ethnic groups within the Midland Police Department.
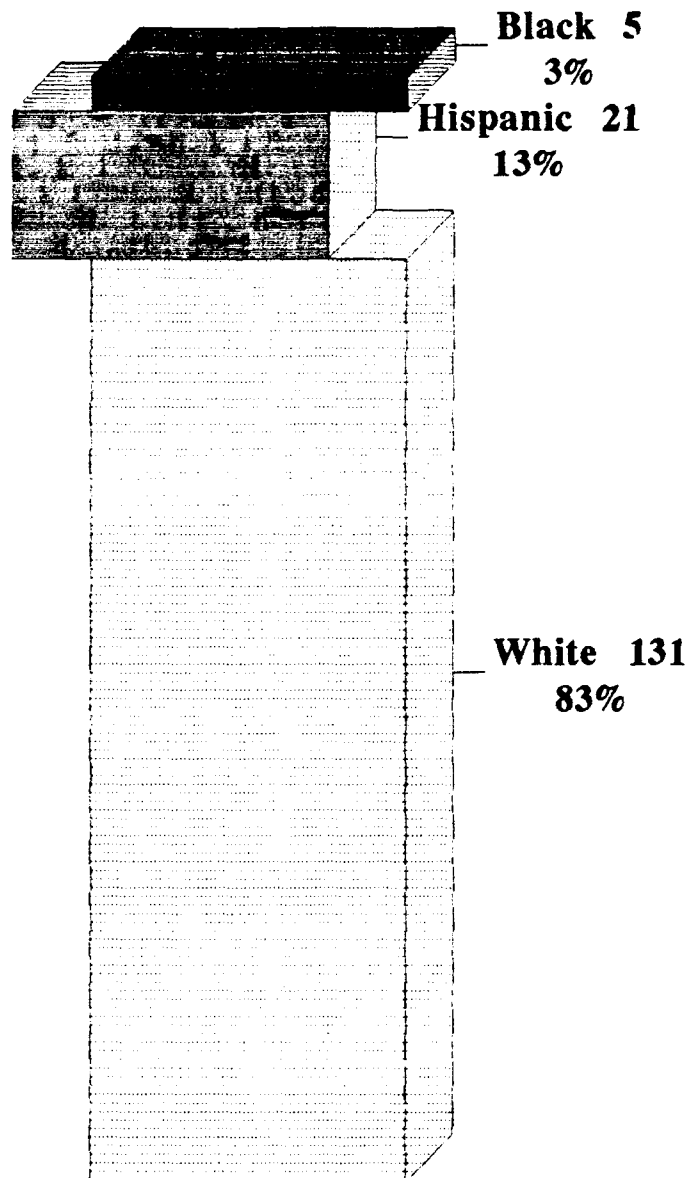
Midland Police Department
Ethnic Breakdown of Certified Personnel

	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991
White	133	133	133	133	132	131	131
Hispanic	21	21	21	21	21	21	21
Black	3	3	3	3	4	5	5

157 Total Officers

Midland Police Department
Ethnic Breakdown of Certified Personnel

Black 5
3%

Hispanic 21
13%

White 131
83%

Year 1991

Total: 157 Officers

VIII. RETENTION RATES OF MINORITY POLICE OFFICERS

A study was done to examine differences in experiences and perceptions of African-American and Anglo officers in their work and whether experiences and perceptions have differing influences on African-American and Anglo officers' likelihood of retention.

A total of 303 police officers (55 per cent African-American and 45 per cent Anglo) from seven agencies were surveyed to determine aspects of their experiences that might influence the likelihood of job retention, notably job assignments, reactions to departmental pre-appointment selection procedures, feelings about the way that they are treated, and some individual characteristics of the officer.

African-American officers reported receiving higher levels of feed-back on both the oral interview and background investigation than Anglo officers. African-American officers also reported receiving less supervisory support during their probationary period. African-American officers were less likely to report that they received fair treatment, and they were more likely to select community-based reasons for remaining police officers while Anglo officers were more likely to select aspects of the job itself. Factors predictive for African-American officers' retention but not for Anglo officers were (1) feedback on oral interview, (2) feedback on background investigation, (3) receiving fair treatment, and (4) reasons why the officers might leave the department. Factors more predictive for Anglo officers' retention

were (1) understanding department goals, (2) self-perceived
social class, and (3) reason for remaining a police officer.[21]

IX. UNDERREPRESENTATION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN POLICE OFFICER.

A series of recent studies has provided the strongest
evidence ever that discrimination against African-American is
still widespread in the United States. The findings sharply
dispute recent claims that hiring practices are colorblind, or
that minorities receive preferential treatment when seeking
employment. They also show that Anglo routinely equate minor-
ity status with qualities of inferiority. The most signifi-
cant study, by the Washington, D.C. based Urban Institute,
found that African-American were three times more likely to be
discriminated against than Anglo when applying for jobs.[22]

THE ARGUMENT

One basic theme implicit in the explanations tendered by
many of the interviewees is that the relatively small number
of minority officers can be explained by overt or covert
agency practices that result in differential of employment of
African-American candidates. This theme then places responsi-
bility for racial imbalance on characteristics particular to
the agency. One component of this argument proposes there are
certain recruitment, selections, and promotion procedures
operate to the distinct disadvantage of minorities (see. e.g.,
National Advisory Commission for Criminal Justice Standards
and Goals, 1973:333; Regoli and Jerome, 1975). Court orders

and legally mandated guidelines, of which there have been many in the past decade (see Dunning, 1982), requiring adoption of and changes in particular personnel procedures and policies appear to incorporate this presumption, at least in part.[23]

Some variations on the denial theme posit the existence of a subtle, but diabolical, subversion of the true goals of affirmative action is subverted by having a few highly-placed and highly visible minority officers, while bars to employment for most minority officers remain in place. Another suspicion is women are hired to meet minority employment goals instead of racial minorities. Another commonly expressed belief is departments hire minorities in non-sworn positions to avoid having sworn minority officers. Finally, there is the less frequently expressed notion that minority officers are somehow subtly denied employment unless the department is of a size sufficient to absorb the minority officers without internal repercussions.[24]

The Choice Argument

Although there are variations on the theme, the basic tenet of the choice argument is that African-Americans find the police career path unattractive. One of the more popular assumptions is that African-Americans harbor a learned anti-pathy for the police. Given the social-control function of the police, and the history of tension has existed between police and minority citizens, some think it unrealistic to expect minorities to aspire to careers as police officers.

Others suggest the (presumed) historical antipathy of minorities to the police is reinforced by the lack of appropriate social values. If police are seen as the symbolic defenders of the status quo, which has all too often left minorities at a disadvantage, then some hypothesize, only middle-class minorities (those with a stake in the status quo) would want to become police officers. Another common explanation is that police departments cannot compete with attractive offers made by private-sector employers to the relatively few well-qualified potential minority employee. Finally, some argue minorities who consider policing as a career make a rational assessment of the poor prospects of advancement in that career path and opt for other occupations.[25]

Theoretically, both arguments and their respective parts are subject to empirical testing. Unfortunately, data are simply not available to address directly the validity of each and every one of the components of the two basic explanatory themes. Particularly elusive are data capable of addressing the explanations offered as part of the choice argument because a true test of such a hypothesis would require individual-level longitudinal data. Because appropriate data do not exist, the best that can be done at this time is to examine critically the logical merit of the choice argument and eliminate as far as possible, competing explanation. Fortunately, there are data which, although not the most ideal imaginable, can be used to address the claims of the denial argument; thus though a bifurcated approach of empirical

testing and a process of elimination, some light can be shed on these explanations for the continued underrepresentation of minority officers on the nation's police force.[26]

Before analyzing these two major themes, mention must be made of the fact that these two explanation are not necessarily antithetical, but at some point become complementary. The claim that minorities choose not to pursue a career in policing appears to excuse any particular agency or agency policy from responsibility for the racial imbalance in police departments, and, instead, places the responsibility on the uninterested potential recruit. This argument weakens, however, when an explanation is sought. If minorities choose not to pursue a career in law enforcement because they perceive either actual or imagined discrimination, then the matter of choice becomes a constrained one. At some point, the difference between a choice argument and a denial argument becomes moot.[27]
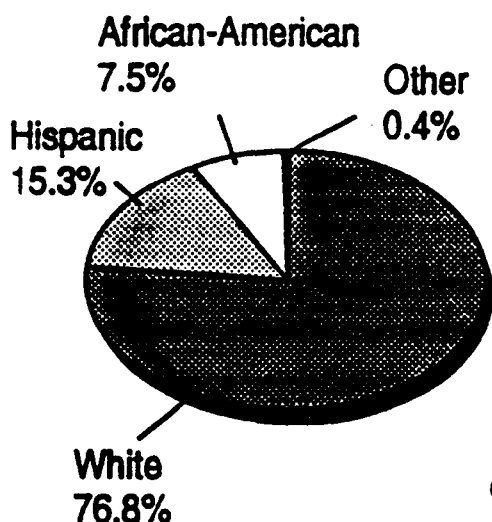
According to the 1990 U.S. Census, Anglos make up about 61% of Texas' total population. Hispanics account for more than 25%, and African-American represent just under 12% of the total, while other ethnic groups (predominantly Asian) account for about 2%. By contrast, February 1992 figures indicate Texas's state, county and municipal police officers are nearly 77% Anglo. Hispanic officers represent about 15% of the total, while African-American officers make up just 7.5% of all police officers. (See graph, next page)
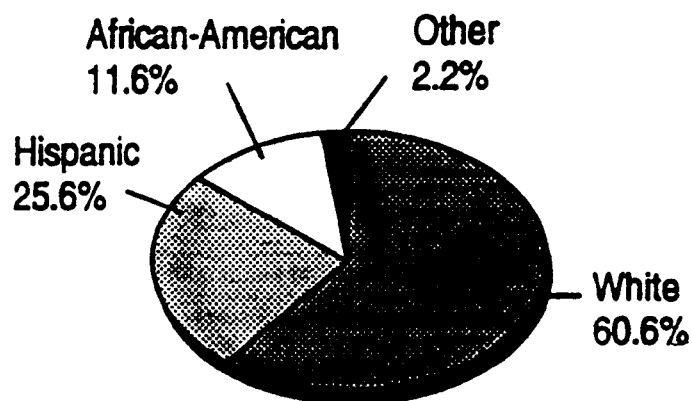
EXHIBIT 10
Minorities underrepresented among Texas' police

The number of Hispanic and African-American Texas peace officers has risen in recent years, but minorities are still substantially underrepresented in the state's police forces.
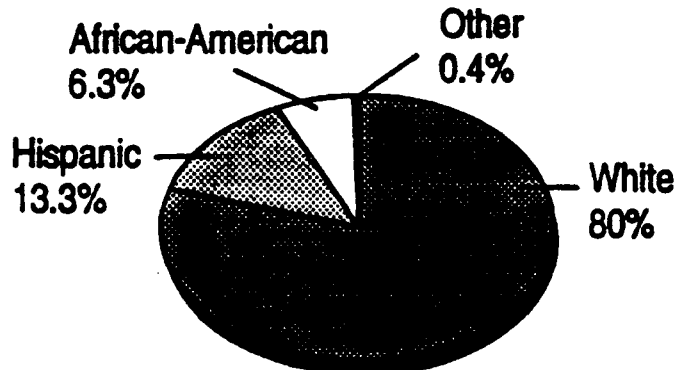
Percent of all peace officers in Texas, 1992

African-American 7.5%
Other 0.4%
Hispanic 15.3%
White 76.8%

Ethnic share of 1990 Texas population

African-American 11.6%
Other 2.2%
Hispanic 25.6%
White 60.6%

Percent of all peace officers in Texas, 1987

African-American 6.3%
Other 0.4%
Hispanic 13.3%
White 80%

Examining Choice

The assumption that minorities avoid police careers because of a learned antipathy enjoys some, although far from conclusive, support from previous research. Public opinion surveys have shown that minorities are more critical of the police than are Anglos. Two studies by Boettcher (1975a and 1975b) indicated that African-Americans do in fact harbor strong negative attitudes toward the police. The negative attitudes of African-Americans toward the police are not solely the result of the social control role of the police, but are partially a consequence of interactions with the police. A review of empirical research on police citizen interaction showed that African-Americans more frequently have negative attitudes toward the police than do Anglos. These attitudes are shaped by police encounters that leave African-Americans with a perception that they have been mistreated or have been unjustly victimized by the police. Other research has indicated that, regardless of geographic or situational characteristics, African-Americans are disproportionately represented as victims of police use of deadly force. Finally, when African-Americans approach police agencies through the complaint process seeking redress, they find that the agencies rarely sustain their complaints or take action against offenders.[28]

Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that African-Americans do not reject outright the protective service and security-related occupations, per se, but that the supposed

antipathy pertains only to public police. Published census data have indicated that although racial minorities account for only 10.7% of the public service workers employed as police and detectives, they make up 18.8% of privately employed security personnel and guards. These facts suggest that if the learned antipathy notion is correct, it applies only to the public function and not to police work itself, which, of course is entirely possible.[29]

Although the existence of negative attitudes toward public police has been established, no research has shown whether these negative attitudes prevent African-Americans from applying for or keeping law enforcement jobs, despite the plausibility of the conclusion. Although the force of logic behind the presumption that attitudes dictate choices is recognized, it is necessary to consider the basis for the attitudes. Most of the opinion studies have asked how respondents would rate the police on their performance, not whether they would like to become police officers. Being critical of performance is not necessarily inconsistent with aspiring to that same profession.[30]

·In attempts to address the question of attitude and career choice, at least two studies have focused on the social pressure placed on a minority who is contemplating a law enforcement career. These studies found that social pressure works against African-American becoming police officers, but the findings again are inconclusive. In a study of juveniles in Des Moines, Boettcher (1975a) found that relatives would

object if the juvenile chose law enforcement as a career. Unfortunately, Boettcher's study was not longitudinal and therefore could not assess the result of the anticipated negative pressure.

A study by Beard (1977) of African-American police officers in Washington, D.C., however, found that only one-third of the officers sampled experienced family opposition to their job choice and the opposition had little impact on the officers' decisions. Given that the sample included only those who did become officers, and that it lacked a longitudinal design, this study cannot provide information on the extent to which peer or family pressure prevents potential recruits from choosing a police career. In addition, it should be noted that Washington, D.C. had a resident population that is predominately African-American (70%) and the police department with 48% African-American officers. Perceptions of the police career may be very different in Washington, D.C. than any other major U.S. city. In short, all that can be said in an absence of other findings, is that there appears to be a possibility that an explanation of learned antipathy is valid.[31]

One of the sub-themes of the choice argument posits that African-American in the low socioeconomic class do not possess the social values conducive to a desire for a police career. In the Des Moines study Boettcher (1975a) found that African-Americans in the lower socioeconomic class are less likely to view law enforcement careers favorably, whereas African-

American in middle- and upper-socioeconomic classes have more favorable attitudes toward law enforcement and law enforcement careers, a finding that lends support to this notion. However, the influence of these attitudes on career selection has not been established. If the attitudes affect career choice, one would expect that in cities where there is a relatively large proportion of the African-American population under the poverty level, there would be relatively fewer African-Americans on the police force, all else being equal.[32]

The notion that private-sector competition is so stiff as to impede affirmative action progress in police agencies is difficult to accept at face value. It fails to explain why there is no lack of well-qualified Anglo police officers, and it incorporates the presumption that there are not enough qualified minorities to supply both the private- and public-sector employers. However, the government has traditionally held the lead in minority employment, (and it still does) a fact that undermines the claim that private-sector competition is too stiff.[33]

Finally, there is the argument that minorities who consider policing as a career make a rational assessment of the poor prospects for advancement in that career path and so opt for other occupations. As with the belief noted immediately above, at first glance, this notion fails to explain why African-Americans react differently to poor advancement opportunities than do Anglos. However, this issue, as suggested by some of the literature, is not that the police field lacks

good opportunity for career advancement, per se (although in fact it does), but that these opportunities are differentially blocked for blacks. Both pre-service and in-service, African-Americans perceive the recruitment, selection, and promotion processes as highly discriminatory against them. However, to use this as an explanation for why African-Americans are underrepresented in policing would necessitate showing that they think their advancement opportunities in policing are relatively worse than in other occupations.[34]

X. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

It is not possible to explain fully why minorities are underrepresented in law enforcement. For when racist actions are perceived to be a part of administrative policy (thereby locking out ethnic minorities), the possibilities for developing significant cultural diversity is severely reduced.

This study has tried to offer some explanation for why there are so few minorities, especially African-Americans in law enforcement. Management must understand police roles and address the issues of institutional and individual racism and cultural sensitivity. Programs in training academies should be designed to address this problem. If given the appropriate attention this could drastically improve the overall attitude and operation of law enforcement agencies all over the county. Minorities want to be given a chance. This does not require lower standards; neither should it require penalty for Anglo officers.

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3. Ibid, 4

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23. Hochstedler, E., and J.A. Conley, "Explaining Under-representation of Black Officers In City Police Agencies." <u>Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice,</u> v14 n4 (1986) p320.

24. Ibid, 321

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid, 322

28. Ibid, 324

29. Ibid, 325

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

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34. Ibid.

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