

ENHANCING LAW ENFORCEMENT PUBLIC TRUST  
IN A DIVERSE COMMUNITY

Article

By

Lieutenant Alex Altavilla  
Santa Barbara Police Department

Command College Class XXXV

Sacramento, California  
November 2003

## INTRODUCTION

This article explores the law enforcement foundation of public trust and examines rapidly changing minority demographic trends in California. Law enforcement is a service industry. Public trust is the foundation that gives law enforcement the authority to deliver police services. Law enforcement is responsible for providing these services to increasingly diverse communities.

## TRUST

Police officers are granted tremendous power and authority to carry out the duty entrusted to them. A police officer has the authority to deprive a person of his or her individual freedom based solely on the officer's sworn testimony, testimony that could place someone in prison for many years. A police officer also has the authority to take a person's life, based on limited information and the officer's state of mind, should the officer perceive that his or her life or the life of another is in jeopardy. These powers are afforded to police officers as a result of public trust, a trust that is earned.<sup>1</sup> The public in return expects professionalism, honesty, and unquestionable ethical behavior from those individuals whom they entrust with such power.<sup>2</sup> The badge is worn over a police officer's heart and symbolizes public trust, integrity and honor. Accompanying the badge is an expectation, and rightfully so, that these men and women be held to a higher standard than the general public.<sup>3</sup> The public has a high set of values and norms that they expect all law enforcement personnel to practice.<sup>4</sup> The law enforcement code of ethics is used as an oath of office during the graduation ceremony for many law enforcement personnel. This oath remains morally binding throughout the officer's

entire length of service in law enforcement.<sup>5</sup> The officer's highest loyalty and obligation, is not to tarnish the badge he or she has been entrusted.<sup>6</sup>

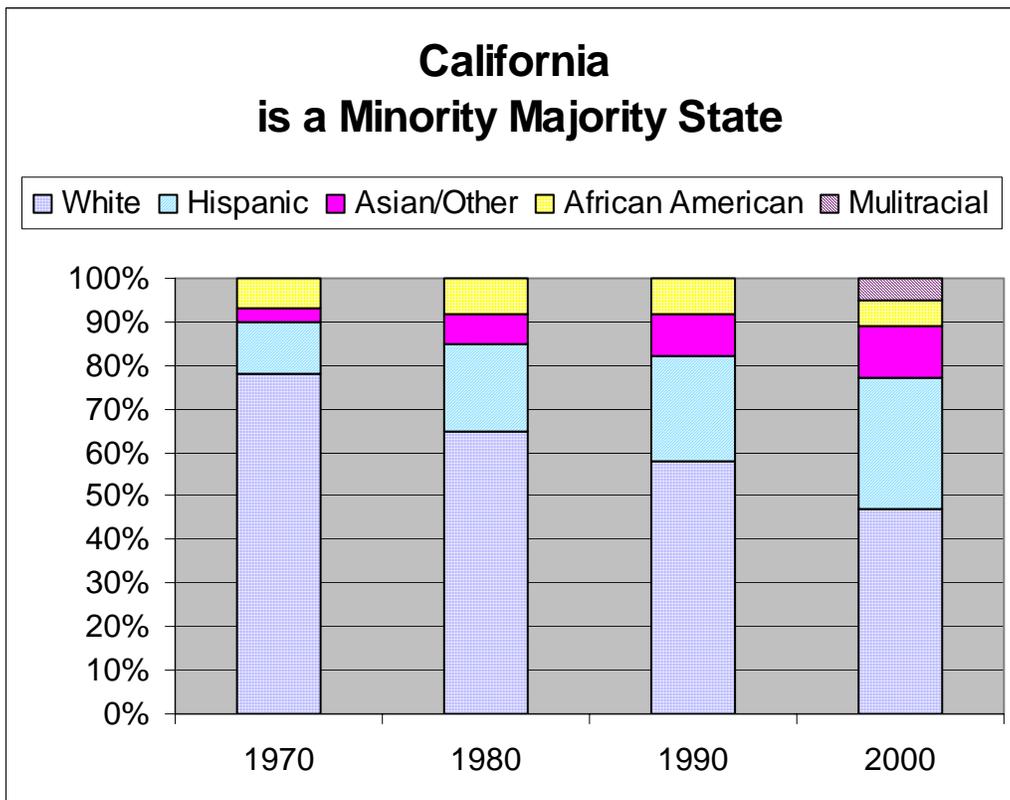
Historically, law enforcement credibility has been taken for granted by the majority of people in California. The public is frequently exposed to reports of public officials violating the public trust in their professional and personal lives.<sup>7</sup> In recent years, people across this nation have been exposed to police abuses that have tainted their view of law enforcement. In 1991, Rodney King was seen being struck repeatedly by Los Angeles police officers with their batons. A videotape of the incident was aired night after night on national news. In 1997, Abner Louima, a Haitian immigrant, was held down by New York City police officers and repeatedly sodomized with the handle of a toilet plunger. In the later part of the 1990s, the Rampart investigation erupted in Los Angeles, California, resulting in officers being arrested for planting evidence, falsifying testimony, and stealing drugs. Most recently, the Inglewood Police Department had two of its officers indicted for assaulting a 16-year-old suspect and filing a false police report. Incidents such as these, which have occurred in many large law enforcement agencies throughout the country, erode trust and confidence once held by the American public in its police departments.<sup>8</sup>

## DIVERSITY

Historically, California was dominated by a white majority population. This is a trend that seems to be continuing in the law enforcement culture even though some gains have been made to recruit minority personnel in the profession. California's population is one of the world's most diverse. Current estimates indicate that no race or ethnic group comprises a majority of the state's population. Many Californians are

multiracial or multiethnic, and one of every four Californians is an immigrant.<sup>9</sup> California is also a very linguistically diverse state. The Department of Motor Vehicles translates documents into thirty languages, and the courts hear testimony in more than one hundred languages.<sup>10</sup> During the 1970s, White, non-Hispanics, accounted for almost 80% of the state population: Today they account for just under half of the state's population.<sup>11</sup> Chart 1 below outlines the demographic history of California, provided by the United States Census Bureau.<sup>12</sup>

Chart 1



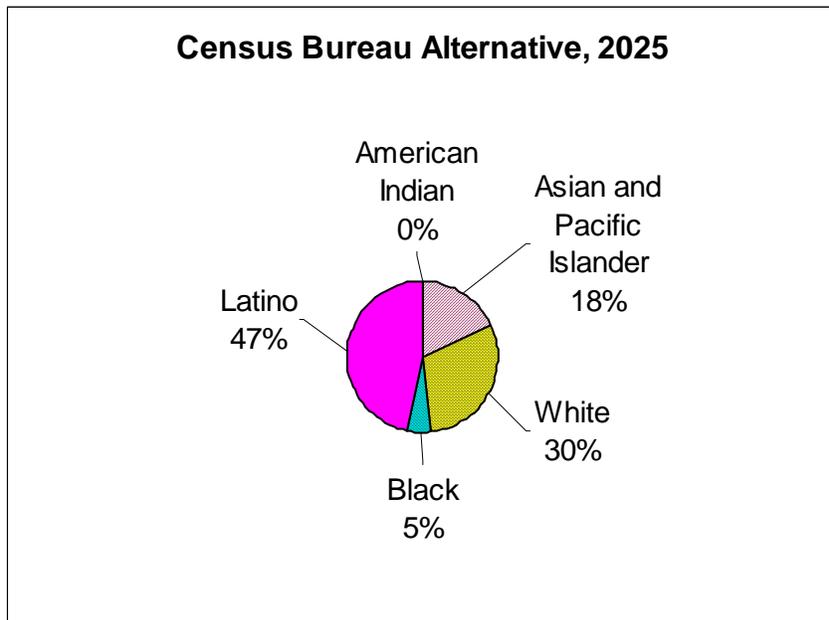
Demographic changes in California continue to show a trend where the White, non-Hispanic population will continue to decline and California will continue to be more

diverse, ultimately being dominated by traditional minority groups. Table 1 and chart 2 below show the future demographic trends for California, provided by the United States Census Bureau.<sup>13</sup>

Table 1  
**Population Projections by Race/Ethnicity (in thousands)**

Census Bureau Alternative	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2025
<b>White</b>	16,631	15,501	14,537	13,771	13,201	12,788	12,477
<b>Latino</b>	9,206	10,628	12,101	13,691	15,433	17,289	19,243
<b>Asian and Pacific Islander</b>	3,379	3,995	4,635	5,309	6,026	6,786	7,582
<b>Black</b>	2,184	2,129	2,083	2,054	2,042	2,042	2,051
<b>American Indian</b>	189	169	154	143	135	130	127

Chart 2



No less important, but less predictable is how the changing composition of the state's population will influence the state's economic evolution, its political

representation, and its cultural identity. Projections of 50 million diverse future Californians suggest that policy issues related to population growth will become even more salient to policy makers.<sup>14</sup> California has already seen people of traditional minority groups who were politically active in the 1960s moving into positions of political and economic authority.

Despite considerable improvements in police community relations over the last several decades, trust and confidence in law enforcement continues to be a serious issue in many minority communities. This is in part because minority residents frequently believe interactions with police officers are motivated by bias and prejudice. Racial profiling, disrespectful treatment, use of force, and aggressive enforcement initiatives have led to anger and resentments on the part of many minority community members.<sup>15</sup> Human interactions depend upon a basic level of trust. “When we leave our homes each day and go out into the world we trust that other drivers will obey traffic laws, other citizens will fulfill their responsibilities as members of a civil society, and help will be provided to us should it be required. In too many places in the United States and around the globe today, people are struggling with this violation of trust and safety.”<sup>16</sup>

Law enforcement has become a very dynamic and complex profession. Local law enforcement is the first line of authority, visible every day to the public it serves. Law enforcement is often viewed as an extension of the government’s authority, which puts the profession under greater levels of scrutiny by the public. When a law enforcement organization violates the public’s trust the media can paint all of law enforcement with the same wide brush.

## FUTURES FORECASTING

Law enforcement leaders frequently believe they know what is best for the communities they serve. They are the trained professionals entrusted with the ability to make decisions regarding public safety concerns. They look at the delivery of services from the inside out. Failing to look at things from the customer's perspective, from the outside in, regarding the delivery of services is a fatal mistake of many failing organizations. According to futurist Ed Barlow, "80 percent of the information we need to know to be successful in the future comes from outside our current field."<sup>17</sup>

A diverse community panel, representative of law enforcement's future customer base, was assembled. The panel was asked, from the community's perspective and looking from the outside in, what they would do to enhance law enforcement public trust in a diverse community. The panel recommended four broad strategies:

- Development of an Executive Diversity Coalition

Law enforcement frequently encounters or creates critical events that have deadly results or at least raise questions about their sometimes split-second actions. Open and honest communication that builds mutual understanding and trust is viewed as a two-way street by diverse law enforcement customers. Law enforcement's failure to proactively respond to community concerns that it made a mistake or that one of its own is under investigation stifles trust. Failure to proactively disclose information undermines the credibility of the organization if the community finds out about it from another source.

Law enforcement leaders should create an executive diversity coalition representing the most prominent minority groups in the community. This coalition would

meet regularly with the agency's head executive to discuss limited policy and procedural matters. When future events occur that affect a diverse group, the head executive can call the appropriate coalition member prior to the release of any information from any source and they can discuss the matter. When the information is released the head executive and coalition member can stand united and assure the diverse community that the matter will be handled appropriately.

- **Development of Diversity Policies, Procedures, and Evaluation Standards**

Law enforcement organizations operate within the boundaries of the law, policies, and procedures. What a law enforcement organization measures and holds its personnel accountable for is what is important. Including key diverse community members, law enforcement should collaborate, develop, and adopt a diversity policy with associated standards of behavior. Law enforcement personnel should be held accountable for their performance in this area and their behavior should be documented in their annual performance appraisals.

- **Development of a Diversity Training Program**

Discrimination lawsuits, public and political pressures have fueled the need for more comprehensive diversity training. Law enforcement organizations should identify a diversity officer who is responsible for a diversity training program. The training should be a funded line-item within the organization's budget, and outside diverse community instructors should be identified. A collaborative process should be used by the diversity officer, selected law enforcement personnel, and the instructor to develop a credible training program. The training should be scheduled quarterly using different mediums, and there should be a testing component to hold law enforcement personnel

accountable for what they have learned. In order for the training to be successful, law enforcement personnel must be aware, understand, and ultimately value diversity.

- Development of a System to Release Internal Affairs Complaint Statistics to the Community

Diverse community members have the perception, sometimes rightfully so, that there is a double standard for law enforcement and the community. This perception is predicated on historical events involving police action with minorities and community distrust about law enforcement holding their employees accountable. If law enforcement would proactively release limited information on personnel investigations to the community when they occur (e.g., thefts/use of force) and the subsequent disposition (e.g., unfounded/sustained), this would be a positive step in the community's ability to trust law enforcement or organizations to hold its employees accountable. This information could be posted in the organization's lobby and be available on their website.

When analyzing these strategies it is important to realize they are directed at changing a perceived law enforcement culture by diverse community members. The strategies that have been discussed challenge the traditional law enforcement culture. Some of them give up control to a diverse community and open up the organization for limited review. However, these suggestions do come from a cross section of the community law enforcement will be serving in the future. All law enforcement personnel, no matter whether they are sworn, civilian, or volunteer, need to be immersed into a new way of thinking. Real change within an organization's culture requires reinforcement for two to five years. Reinforcement of new habits and values

must be connected to the community and frontline law enforcement personnel.<sup>18</sup> This culture change of celebrating differences, tolerance and respect should permeate the organization inside as well as out.

## CONCLUSION

Law enforcement is granted tremendous authority by the community to perform their duties. This authority is based on law and the public's trust. Within the next five years the communities law enforcement serves will become increasingly diverse. It is critical that law enforcement leaders begin to develop and implement strategies to enhance trust with the future customers they will be serving.

The future of the law enforcement profession will continue to become increasingly complex. Law enforcement's fundamental duty is to serve the community. The future communities served by law enforcement will become more diverse. There will be significant future changes in communities' economic and political representation, as well as their culture identity. In order to accomplish a public safety mission, the community has given the law enforcement profession awesome authority. This authority is based on trust, which is the profession's most precious commodity. The community in return expects professionalism, honesty, and unquestionable integrity from law enforcement personnel entrusted with such authority. The badge is a symbol of public faith presented to law enforcement personnel who take an oath of office never to violate that trust. Trust is a foundation on which everything else is built. Law enforcement leaders in mid-size agencies must use trust as their organization's bottom-line, synonymous with profit in the private business world. For a law enforcement

organization to be successful in its public safety mission, business profits (trust) must be high.

Private prisons and gated communities with their own police services are some examples of private law enforcement organizations. School vouchers are available in some communities to residents who are not satisfied with the service they receive from the public school system. Residents have the ability to purchase school services from an organization of their choosing, which is responsive to their needs. Competition is one of the pillars of a free society that has made the United States a world superpower. The yellow pages are full of choices for consumers looking to purchase services. If the community receives poor service from one company, it can choose to spend its money elsewhere. People do not patronize businesses that they do not trust or that provide them with poor service. Could diverse community members be issued law enforcement vouchers, in order to purchase police services from an organization of their choosing? What if an officer came to work in uniform one day and there was a sign on his or her department's front door that said: "Out of Business". Confused by the sign and the fact that his or her key does not work in the door, he or she calls 9-1-1 to get some answers. The telephone rings and he or she hears, "This number is no longer in service. Check your local telephone book for a list of private law enforcement services." Could this happen to law enforcement? Leaders should make every effort to enhance public trust and ensure that law enforcement personnel live up to the principles of their oath of office. They must also be responsive to the needs of an ever-changing diverse community. Failure to do so could lead to the extinction of the public law enforcement profession.

How will law enforcement leaders in a mid-size agency enhance public trust in a diverse community by 2008? A vision of a solid trusting relationship with diverse community members is a desired future. Law enforcement leaders must clearly communicate this conceptual vision and implement the following strategies:

- Development of an executive diversity coalition
- Development of diversity policies, procedures, and evaluation standards
- Development of a diversity training program
- Development of a system to release internal affairs complaint statistics to the community

The bond of trust has to be the strongest link in the chain of public safety. Diversity should be viewed as a strength that continues to enable law enforcement to maintain a strong relationship with the community. This bold vision, a solid trusting relationship with diverse community members, will build tolerance and give law enforcement the ability to provide a better quality of life in the communities it serves.

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<sup>1</sup> Chief Jerry Dryer and Lieutenant Keith Foster, "Managing Change: Reorganizing and Building Community Trust," City of Fresno Police Department; available from <http://www.cpoa.org>; Internet.

<sup>2</sup> Dan Blanke, John Moilan, Ed McErlain, Phil Donohue, and Paul Henisey, "Credibility, Honesty and Integrity in Law Enforcement," California Peace Officers Association; available from <http://www.cpoa.org/Publications/Sample%20Policies/credibility.shtml>; Internet; assessed September 20, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> J. Kevin Grant, "Ethics and Law Enforcement," FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin (December 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> "Just the Facts, California's Population," Public Policy Institute of California (June 2002); available from <http://www.ppic.org>; Internet.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Barlow, Futurist, "Creating the Future, Inc.," Command College Class #35 Presentation (May 14, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Hans P. Johnson, "How Many Californian's," Public Policy Institute of California 1, No. 1 (October 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> "Examining Minority Trust and Confidence in the Police," National Criminal Justice Reference Service, National Institute of Criminal Justice; available from <http://www.ncjrs.org>; Internet.

<sup>16</sup> "Broken Bonds of Trust, Police Abuse and Misconduct," Trauma Foundation; available from <http://www.tf.org>; Internet; accessed January 19, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 7.