

"On the Beat": New Roles And Challenges For Immigrant Police And Firefighters

by Stewart Lawrence for the Immigration Policy Center

Executive Summary

The mainstream media, conservative politicians, and even some police organizations continue to promote stereotypes of immigrants as insufficiently "loyal" to America to serve in law-enforcement jobs. Ironically, similar fears were expressed about earlier generations of Irish and Italian immigrants whose dedicated public service helped usher in the modern urban police department. Today, immigrants are once again a vital part of law enforcement as patrol officers and detectives, and in a wide range of police auxiliary roles. Immigrants are also making important contributions to local communities as municipal firefighters and seasonal workers contracted by the federal government to fight deadly and destructive wild fires. America's streets are unquestionably safer and our neighborhoods more peaceful thanks to the growing number of immigrants available to serve and protect.

- There were about 46,000 foreign-born police officers and detectives and 9,700 foreign-born firefighters on the job as of 2006. Roughly 6 percent of police patrol officers and detectives, and 5 percent of firefighters, were foreign-born. Police are four times more likely to be foreign-born and firefighters are twice as likely to be foreign-born than they were in 1995.
- Although the foreign-born as a percent of all police and fire department personnel has risen steadily over the past 10 years, it remains well below the foreignborn percent of the total U.S. population. Moreover, it is dwarfed by the percentage of foreign-born workers in "immigrant-heavy" industries like agriculture, construction, and food service.
- Among the police, a higher share of the foreign-born are employed as detectives (7.6 percent) than as patrol officers (5.1 percent). This is largely due to the nature of undercover police work, which can involve international crime syndicates as well as global terrorist organizations. Police detectives require special skills to operate in this milieu, including foreign-language fluency and, on occasion, an ability to literally "blend in" with foreign nationals or foreign-born residents of the United States.
- In New York, which is a major target and arena for global drug and terrorism activities, one-third of the state's police detective force is foreign-born. By contrast, California does not have a disproportionately high proportion of foreign-born police detectives, but 10 percent of the state's patrol officers are foreign-born.
- Relaxing current U.S.-citizenship requirements for police officers would allow state and local governments to recruit a much larger number of foreign-born applicants to perform vital community-policing roles. In addition, renewed

funding for the highly successful COPS community-policing program would enable financially strapped police forces to retain more foreignborn personnel.

Introduction

During the first half of 2007, three New York Police Department (NY PD) patrol officers—one sworn member of the regular force and two unarmed police "auxiliaries"—were gunned down and killed on the streets of New York. The first incident occurred in March in Manhattan's Greenwich Village. The two auxiliaries, dressed in police uniforms nearly identical to those worn by regular officers—but stripped of weapons, handcuffs, or even arrest authority—bravely chased a gunman, accused of murdering a neighborhood pizza clerk, through deserted streets until the gunman turned and fired his weapon. Both officers died at the scene—the first NY PD auxiliaries killed in action since 1993. One of the officers, a part-time student who had long dreamed of becoming one of New York's finest, had just turned 19.^[1]

Less than three months later, two Brooklyn squad car cops, both in their early 20s, were shot at point blank range by the passengers of an SUV. The officer who approached the driver of the SUV was wearing a bulletproof vest and managed to survive a shotgun blast to his chest. The other officer was not so lucky. Shot in the face, he was rushed to a nearby hospital but died five days later. The murdered officer had been on the force barely a year but already had made over a dozen felony arrests. Considered one of the precinct's most promising young patrol officers, he was just 23 years old at the time of his death.^[2]

In a city as large as New York, dozens of heroic police officers are injured or killed in the line of duty each year. But what made these deaths so unusual—and poignant—was that these brave young men in uniform were also brave young *immigrants* in uniform. They are part of the small but growing percentage of U.S. police and fire departments that are changing their hiring rules and recruiting legal permanent residents (LPRs) to "serve and protect" communities with large numbers of recently arrived immigrants. The NY PD, representing America's premier gateway metropolis for immigrants, is in the forefront of this new diversity recruitment drive with 40 full-time officers aggressively recruiting applicants from all of the city's newcomer communities. This far surpasses efforts now underway in Miami, Los Angeles, Chicago, and other major destination cities for immigrants.^[3]

By all accounts, the NY PD's effort is paying off. In 2005, the city's police academy graduated its first senior class of rookies that was "majority-minority." The following year, on nearly the same day that the two squad car officers were shot in Brooklyn, the police academy graduated 1,103 students, *nearly a quarter of them foreign-born*. The 264 students represent 48 different countries, including Turkey, Azerbaijan, Venezuela, Albania, and Burma. It was the most diverse student body ever graduated from a police academy anywhere in the country—and quite possibly anywhere in the world.^[4]

Many observers compare the role of immigrants in domestic law enforcement to that of immigrants serving in the U.S. military.^[5] If immigrants can be trusted to carry weapons to fight America's enemies overseas, goes the argument, why can't they be trusted to fight crime and protect Americans at home? Other observers believe there is little comparison between the two roles because immigrants at home are part of the broader domestic community—not simply a U.S. fighting force—and must interact daily with other Americans, both native-born and foreign-born, the vast majority of whom are already U.S. citizens. Some police and firefighting unions are also greatly concerned about the impact immigrants might have on their wages and on the promotion of veteran officers.^[6]

However this debate is resolved, immigrants *are* becoming more involved in U.S. police and firefighting work. Since the 1980s, rising immigration to America's troubled inner cities, combined with a shift in policing theory and practice away from "bureaucratic-professionalism" in favor of "community policing" strategies, has caused police and firefighters to re-think their personnel and staffing needs.^[7] In addition, even while municipal fire departments have only recently begun to welcome immigrants into their ranks, there has been an enormous demand for newcomer immigrants to help fight the nation's wild fires {see sidebar}. In general, police and firefighting forces that are already under pressure to diversify their ranks to better represent African Americans, Asians, and Latinos—and, more recently, women, gays, and trans-gendered people—are now feeling additional pressure to go one step further and accommodate the foreign-born.

The Continuing Legacy of Immigrants in the Police Force

The idea that immigrants should play a major role in U.S. police forces is hardly new. Indeed, for most of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Irish—and later Italian—immigrants dominated the ranks of most major metropolitan police departments. In some U.S. cities, immigrants or their children were able to ascend to the position of police chief. By the mid-19th century, 40 percent of New York City's police were immigrants, and about three-quarters of these immigrants were Irish. In Chicago, almost 50 percent of the entire police force was comprised of Irish immigrants. These percentages, which grew in succeeding decades, were even higher in neighborhoods dominated by Irish immigrants.^[8] Then, as now, joining the police force was an important way out of the lower-class occupations to which most immigrants were consigned, and a chance to become more widely accepted by mainstream America. It was also the nation's first large-scale experiment in "community policing"—a way of connecting immigrants to the civic life of their neighborhoods and maintaining social peace. For immigrants, seeing one's "own" people in uniform was also a boost to national pride during times of economic hardship.

If the role of the police in the larger drama of immigrant integration appears significantly reduced today, it is largely because contemporary immigrants exhibit more diverse demographic characteristics than their predecessors. Not all immigrants are heavily concentrated in urban areas, and even less-skilled immigrants can pursue avenues for social mobility that were unimaginable a century ago. Moreover, the political party machines that placed immigrant police at the center of local patronage systems have all

but disappeared. Nevertheless, with urban inner-city neighborhoods increasingly dominated by the foreign-born, and with immigration at its highest national level since the early 1900s, the reasons for incorporating immigrants into police ranks—to facilitate integration and maintain order—are still broadly the same.

Slow and Uneven Growth in the Hiring of Immigrants

Most police and fire departments do not collect data on the nativity of their personnel, but based on U.S. Census data, there appeared to be almost 46,000 foreign-born police officers and detectives and about 9,700 foreignborn firefighters on the job as of 2006. Roughly 6 percent of police patrol officers and detectives, and 5 percent of firefighters, were foreign-born. These percentages may seem small, but they represent a major increase over the foreignborn percentage of just 10 years ago. Police are four times more likely to be foreign-born and firefighters are twice as likely to be foreign-born than they were in 1995.

Although the foreign-born as a percent of all police and fire department personnel has risen steadily over the past ten years, it remains well below the foreign-born percent of the total U.S. population. Moreover, it is dwarfed by the percentage of foreign-born workers in "immigrant-heavy" industries like agriculture, construction, and food service. A closer look at the data also reveals that the foreign-born are virtually absent from the upper ranks of police and fire department management and are more likely to be employed in less-skilled police occupations such as the railroad and transit police or bail and correctional officers {Table 1}.

Among the police, a higher share of the foreign-born are employed as detectives (7.6 percent) than as patrol officers (5.1 percent). This is largely due to the nature of undercover police work, which can involve international crime syndicates as well as global terrorist organizations. Police detectives require special skills to operate in this milieu, including foreign-language fluency and, on occasion, an ability to literally "blend in" with foreign nationals or foreign-born residents of the United States.

New York, for example, is both a major target and a major arena for global drug and terrorism activities. Thus, one would expect a relatively high proportion of foreign-born detectives operating in this region. One-third of the state's police detective force is foreign-born. Furthermore, close to half (43 percent) of all foreign-born police detectives operate in the state of New York. By contrast, California does not have a disproportionately high proportion of police detectives who are foreign-born. However, the state does have a disproportionately high percentage of police patrol officers who are foreign-born—10 percent compared to the national average of 5 percent. In addition, nearly a quarter (24.3 percent) of all foreign-born police currently "on the beat" in America patrol in California {Table 2}.

Only U.S. Citizens Allowed?

Another key characteristic of foreign-born police and firefighters is their relatively high

rates of naturalization. These rates, 80 percent and above, dwarf the naturalization levels for foreign-born workers in leading less-skilled industries like construction, agriculture, and food service. These industries, some of which have naturalization rates of less than 10 percent, also have extremely high percentages of undocumented workers.

While citizenship is an important emblem of "Americanization" and perceived loyalty to the United States as a nation, it is unclear how much of a formal requirement citizenship is, or should be, to perform most routine police work. The issue continues to be a hotly contested one for most major police departments, but supporters of immigrants who have sponsored legislation to lift the citizenship requirement for police in New York argue that it is discriminatory and self-defeating, as it deprives the police force of a ready source of qualified recruits.^[9]

Until recently, citizenship was a non-negotiable requirement for joining the ranks of most police (and fire) departments. Even today, while some police forces have begun to welcome qualified foreign-born residents into their ranks, most do so with the assumption that these applicants are either U.S. citizens or are rapidly on the way to achieving naturalization. The police department of Honolulu, Hawaii, is one of the few that openly welcomes not only LPRs, but also non-immigrant visa holders who meet the department's other hiring requirements.^[10] The Los Angeles police department requires that applicants who are LPRs apply for U.S. citizenship by the time they take the written entrance exam and that they acquire citizenship by their third year on the force. This means that, at any given time, hundreds of Los Angeles cops on the beat patrolling some of the country's most violent neighborhoods are still LPRs. Other police departments have periodically amended or sidestepped their rules to hire immigrants as regular members of the sworn force, usually in response to a specific crisis. For example, in the 1990s the Lowell, Massachusetts, police department found itself unable to patrol the rapidly growing Cambodian refugee population and ended up declaring an institutional "state of emergency" to rapidly train, hire, and promote six new Cambodian police recruits.^[11]

A more common solution that police departments pursue is to hire LPRs for a range of civilian or unarmed jobs—but not as "sworn" officers on patrol. Some of these civilian jobs are critical administrative desk positions (*e.g.*, 911 dispatchers), while others involve immigrants as language interpreters, translators, media liaisons, and community service officers. In addition, a number of police departments have built on the example of the police department in Corcoran, California, by establishing "citizens' academies" in which foreign-born residents, especially Latinos, can learn firsthand about police work and "graduate" by becoming unpaid police auxiliaries.^[12]

Recruitment Challenges

Since the 1990s, as more and more police departments have embraced "community policing" as a strategy for engaging local communities, they have recognized the need to create special cultural and language bridges to their fast-growing immigrant populations.^[13] In some cases, police relations with these communities have been damaged and need repair. While many native-born residents can perform these "bridge-

building" jobs, hiring immigrants to do so more closely aligns the police with the affected community—with a much bigger pay-off in terms of establishing trust and credibility.

One of the earliest defenses of the need to recruit and retain more immigrants in U.S. police forces was a U.S. Justice Department-funded report, *Lengthening the Stride*, published by the National Crime Prevention Council in 1995. The report focused special attention on the needs of Southeast Asian refugees and outlined a range of ways in which police relations with these communities could be improved. The report cited numerous examples of cultural misunderstandings between native-born police officers and immigrants that could complicate arrests and become flashpoints for conflict and violence. If nothing else, native-born police on patrol are less likely to be killed or injured when accompanied by foreign-born officers with the same ethnicity and immigration history as the community being patrolled.^[15]

A number of more recent reports on the successes and challenges of the Justice Department's 10-year Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program have also highlighted the enormous obstacles that police departments face in building the trust and confidence of immigrant communities and in recruiting immigrants to the force.¹⁵ In addition to cultural insensitivity and prejudice emanating from U.S. police forces, recently arrived immigrants are frequently ignorant of the wide-ranging roles and responsibilities of U.S. police forces. Immigrants from rural areas especially are often accustomed to resolving intra-community disputes communally and may have little experience with cities and modern technology, let alone state-run criminal justice systems.^[16]

Researchers have noted that police recruiters face special challenges in recruiting immigrants to the force because of strong opposition and distrust from the applicants' immediate family, especially their parents.^[17] The parents of the two police auxiliaries killed in Manhattan were unaware that their children were volunteering for the NYPD and, according to friends, would have staunchly opposed their children's involvement.^[18] Police recruiters have come to see the immigrant recruitment challenge in terms of "winning over the entire family" rather than simply convincing the applicant, who is usually highly motivated and inspired to join the force. The parents, like the community generally, may have had bad experiences in the past with police in their home countries. As a result, in many cases (especially among refugees), parents often associate police forces with repression and may feel confusion and shame that their children are considering a career in law enforcement.

Another key recruitment obstacle for the foreign-born is the standard police department requirement that applicants exhibit high levels of English fluency.^[19] Foreign-born recruits may have acquired the ability to converse in English, but their command of English grammar and syntax is often weak. Police work requires the ability to write reports and nearly all police entrance exams are "paper-and-pencil" tests with which many immigrant applicants struggle due to poor English writing skills. When departments have made special exceptions to hire immigrants (*e.g.*, Lowell), they have typically had to modify their English fluency requirement. Police sources note that there

is a large pool of foreign-born candidates who could pass the citizenship requirement, but still not meet the English fluency requirement.^[20]

Stereotyping of Police in the Media

Another powerful obstacle to police recruitment of immigrants—and broader public acceptance of the idea—is the way police work and immigrants are frequently portrayed in the mainstream media, especially in Hollywood action movies and in crime-oriented television dramas like *Law and Order* and *CSI*. The relatively placid view of police work depicted in *Dragnet* or *CHiPs* or in sit-coms such as *Mayberry RFD* has given way to intense, lurid, and emotionally driven crime dramas that tend to exaggerate the level of stress and violence encountered in daily police work.^[21] Because immigrant families are already fearful of their children's involvement in dangerous police work, exaggerated portraits of these dangers serve to hinder effective recruitment.^[22]

Media stereotyping and "hying" of police work also extends to the ways that foreign-born police are portrayed in crime dramas and movies. In recent years, controversy has dogged the portrayal of Asian police officers, including the Chinese police psychologist on *Law and Order* and the Chinese detective "hero" in *The Corruptor*, a major Hollywood movie released in 1999.^[23] In both cases, the immigrant police protagonists are depicted as too closely involved with their "own" communities to conduct "objective" police work. The subtle message, never explicitly stated, is that immigrant police retain national and cultural ties that could jeopardize their professionalism and even undermine their loyalty to American laws and values. In this highly charged and stereotyped media environment, neither immigrant communities nor the broader public are likely to embrace wholeheartedly an expanded role for immigrants in the nation's police forces.

Agendas for Action

The following two areas of legislative policy must be addressed in order to assure continued progress in recruiting foreign-born individuals to serve their communities as police and firefighters:

1. Funding for the COPS program

Many local police forces began expanding their community-policing operations in the late 1970s. However, it was not until the federal government inaugurated the COPS program in 1984 that local police departments had the funding to hire more police and expand foot patrols and other community liaison activities in metropolitan communities heavily populated by immigrants. By all accounts, the COPS program was a success and should be re-funded in some form.^[24] However, without leadership from the White House, there appears to be dwindling support for the program in Congress.^[25] Since the original 10-year pilot program expired in 2004, many police departments have found it difficult to comply with the original agreement to transition newly hired COPS officers to full-time positions on the force. Without more political support in the Congress, experts

believe that the gains in community policing made during the 1994-2004 period may well be lost.

2. U.S. citizenship as a requirement for becoming a police officer or firefighter

The debate over whether police and fire departments should formally lift the citizenship requirement continues to smolder under the radar of public attention. In 2007, for the third consecutive year, state representatives in New York introduced several bills that would lift the requirement for police and firefighters statewide or in New York City only. All three bills were quickly bottled up in committee in response to heavy lobbying from New York's police and firefighter unions.^[26] In fact, in New York and elsewhere, LPRs are serving in a number of police and firefighting capacities in the absence of official state and local laws formally authorizing their participation. There is considerable legal debate over whether such authorization is necessary and, in any event, there is clearly room for compromise. Los Angeles and other police jurisdictions already allow immigrants to serve on the force as long as they have applied for citizenship and are naturalized within three years. Other measures could restrict immigrants from becoming involved in sensitive national-security cases or limit their involvement to beat patrols—which is more or less the case already. Relaxing the citizenship requirement would allow state and local governments to recruit a much larger number of foreign-born applicants to perform vital community policing roles.

Conclusion

The mainstream media, conservative politicians, and even some police organizations continue to promote stereotypes of immigrants as insufficiently "loyal" to America to serve in most public-sector jobs, including law enforcement. Ironically, similar fears were expressed about earlier generations of Irish and Italian immigrants whose dedicated public service helped usher in the modern urban police department. Today, immigrants are once again a vital part of urban law enforcement as patrol officers and detectives, and in a wide range of police auxiliary roles. Immigrants are also making important contributions to local communities as full-time municipal firefighters and, even more so, as seasonal workers contracted by the federal government to fight deadly and destructive wild fires. America's streets are unquestionably safer and our neighborhoods more peaceful thanks to the growing number of immigrants available to serve and protect. Encouraging—rather than restricting—this growth celebrates America's long-standing tradition as an immigrant-receiving nation. It also honors the memory of three heroic young New York City patrol officers whose faith in America led them to make the ultimate sacrifice.

Endnotes

¹ In a funeral ceremony held several days later, NYPD Police Chief Raymond Kelly publicly hailed the fallen police auxiliaries as "true heroes." See Graham Rayman & Andrew Strickler, "Slain Officers were 'True heroes'," *Newsday*, March 16, 2007.

² Tom Hays, "Intense Manhunt After 2 New York Police Officers Shot and Wounded," *Associated Press*, July 9, 2007.

³ Tom Hays, "NYPD's Diversity Reflects Demographic Shifts," *USA Today*, July 18, 2007.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵ For an overview of immigrants in the U.S. military, see Margaret D. Stock, *Essential to the Fight: Immigrants in the Military, Five Years After 9/11*. Washington, DC: American Immigration Law Foundation, November 2006.

⁶ Daniela Gerson, "Police May Win OK to Hire Legal Aliens," *The New York Sun*, November 29, 2004.

⁷ For more on this shift in police thinking, see David Alan Sklansky, "Not Your Father's Police Department: Making Sense of the Demographics of Law Enforcement," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 96(3), Spring 2006. Most observers agree that metropolitan police departments have made enormous strides in hiring diversity in recent decades. However, the ethnic composition of these departments still does not fully reflect the diversity of the populations served.

⁸ See George W. Potter, *To the Golden Door: The Story of the Irish in Ireland and America*. Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1960.

⁹ Author's interview with Ann Horowitz, aide to Assemblyman Daniel J. O'Donnell (D), sponsor of one of the bills, September 15, 2007. The text justifying this and other proposed state legislation notes that the NYPD is facing a shortage of police recruits and that 40 percent of New York City residents are non-citizen immigrants.

¹⁰ See the Honolulu police department's website (www.honoluluupd.org/hrd/mpr_requirements.htm). Police departments in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, and Farmington, New Mexico (among others) also allow non-citizens to join the force as sworn officers.

¹¹ Sarah Hay, *et al.*, *Lengthening the Stride: Employing Peace Officers from Newly Arrived Ethnic Groups*. Washington, DC: National Crime Prevention Council, 1995, p. 38. Police departments in St. Paul, Minnesota, and Sacramento, California, have also hired Cambodian officers to help patrol these emerging communities.

¹² For a review of citizens' police academies currently operating in California, see the web site of the Institute on Local Government (www.ilsg.org).

¹³ Police departments have generally taken these positive steps far in advance of elected officials, who may be unaware of the challenges police face in adapting to immigrant communities. See Paul G. Lewis & S. Karthick Ramakrishnan, "Police Practices in

Immigrant-Destination Cities: Political Control or Bureaucratic Professionalism," *Urban Affairs Review* 42(6), July 2007.

¹⁴ Sarah Hay, et al., *Lengthening the Stride: Employing Peace Officers from Newly Arrived Ethnic Groups*. Washington, DC: National Crime Prevention Council, 1995, pp. 10-11. The report also cites a reduction in crime and a reduction in the fear of crime as some of the benefits of having immigrants involved in patrolling their own communities.

¹⁵ See, for example, Anita Khashu, et al., *Building Strong Police Immigrant Community Relations: Lessons from a New York City Project*. New York, NY: Vera Institute of Justice, August 2005. The report was funded by the Department of Justice under the auspices of the COPS program.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁷ Sarah Hay, et al., *Lengthening the Stride: Employing Peace Officers from Newly Arrived Ethnic Groups*. Washington, DC: National Crime Prevention Council, 1995, pp. 16-17.

¹⁸ Graham Rayman & Andrew Strickler, "Slain Officers were 'True heroes'," *Newsday*, March 16, 2007.

¹⁹ Sarah Hay, et al., *Lengthening the Stride: Employing Peace Officers from Newly Arrived Ethnic Groups*. Washington, DC: National Crime Prevention Council, 1995, pp. 18-19.

²⁰ This is especially true of Puerto Ricans, who are U.S. citizens by birth. Author's interview with Mauricio Veiga, Recruitment Officer, Montgomery County, Maryland, Police Department, September 17, 2007.

²¹ David Alan Sklansky, "Not Your Father's Police Department: Making Sense of the Demographics of Law Enforcement," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 96(3), Spring 2006.

²² Author's interview with Mauricio Veiga, Chief Recruitment Officer, Montgomery County, Maryland, Police Department, September 15, 2007.

²³ In the case of *The Corruptor*, the police department's star Chinese detective turns out to be covertly allied with one wing of the Chinese immigrant mafia. For another example of this kind of controversy, see Asia Media Watch, "Asian Stereotypes and Themes Fill NBC's *Law and Order, Special Victims Unit*," posted October 22, 2004 (www.asianmediawatch.net/lawandordersvu/).

²⁴ See Jeffrey A. Roth & Joseph F. Ryan, *The COPS Program After 4 Years—National Evaluation*. National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, August 2000.

²⁵ See the testimony of Edmund Mosca, Chief of Police, Old Saybrook, Connecticut, and Chairman of the International Association of Chiefs of Police Legislative Committee, before the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security, April 24, 2007.

²⁶ Author's interview with Jason Abend, Executive Director, National Law Enforcement Recruiters Association, September 14, 2007. The three police citizenship bills in the New York State Assembly are AB 1606, AB 4602, and AB 5275. The Assembly also considered legislation that would abolish citizenship requirements for military veterinarians and for higher-education professionals. The bill dealing with veterinarians passed in July 2007.

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