

FACING DWINDLING NUMBERS, THE D.C. POLICE DEPARTMENT GRAPPLES WITH HOW TO RECRUIT THE NEXT GENERATION OF COPS.

IN PURSUIT

*STORY BY **TOM DUNKEL**
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Master Patrol Officer Tim McKenna, left, and officer Michael Pearson, a rookie McKenna is training, speed to a shooting in Northeast Washington.



A

large marker board dominates one wall of Phil Honoré's office inside the 1st District Station on M Street SW. It's positioned directly across from his desk, an ever-looming presence. On that board, Honoré, deputy director of the Metropolitan Police Department's Office of Recruiting, has written in bold script the starting salaries of his immediate competitors: Prince George's County, \$47,076; Baltimore, \$48,971; Montgomery County, \$50,201; Fairfax County, \$50,263. (D.C. officers start at \$53,750; a 3 percent raise was set to take effect Oct. 1.) Police recruiters are analogous to college football and basketball coaches scrambling to sign the same blue-chip prospects.

"Today's applicant, they want to be courted," said Honoré, who, prior to donning his civilian suit and tie, was a uniformed officer for both the District and the Department of Defense. "They want to know, 'Does MPD want me?'"

The answer is a resounding yes. However, for various reasons — perceived dangers

of the job, the prying eyes of roaming citizen-videographers, a younger generation less enamored with public service, the sour "Ferguson effect" aftertaste of civilian shootings in Missouri and elsewhere — police work has lost some luster. Consequently, the talent pool is thinner, vacancies harder to fill. In the spring Dallas canceled two police academy classes for lack of interest. Chicago was forced to lower its minimum age for rookie officers from 25 to 18. Philadelphia dumped a college-credits requirement. Here in the District — where the dynamic has been complicated by a retirement bubble — the police department's head count shrank to 3,786 in December, the lowest in at least a decade.

Honoré has worked closely with Ben Haiman, who until recently oversaw police training and recruiting for the D.C. police. They complement each other well. Honoré is a stocky native Washingtonian who decided at about age 10 that he wanted to be a cop. Haiman is long and lean, originally from La Grange, Ill., and still an aw-shucks Midwesterner at heart. He planned to become a high school math teacher, then changed direction during a college summer internship with the D.C. police.

Haiman has been crunching recruiting statistics since he joined the department in 2009. "Typically, I'll check these spreadsheets eight to 10 times a day," he said. A trove of information on his laptop was at his fingertips. He knew, for example, that in 2015, 41 percent of new officers hired by D.C. police were black, 38.9 percent white, 14.4 percent Hispanic, 5.4 percent Asian and 0.36 percent Native American. Sixty-three percent had a bachelor's or master's degree. But other numbers tell a different story. Applications declined approximately 26 percent from 2013 to 2014 and dipped another 28 percent from 2014 to 2015.

The days of waiting for new blood to walk through the door are over. The D.C. police department has developed what's arguably the most high-tech recruiting operation of any large city. Ninety percent of applicants now make initial contact via smartphone or tablet. The department is active on Twitter and Facebook yet still employs some old-fashioned tactics. What could be lower-tech than a rear-window decal? Virtually every vehicle in the fleet (even the chief's) has one that reads, "Join us. DCpolicejobs.dc.gov." In this harsh recruiting climate any idea short of kidnapping merits consideration.

"For us," said Haiman, "it's however we can pull you into the system."

Despite this relentless age of social media, face-to-face recruiting isn't dead. The recruiting division has 33 employees. Most of them conduct background checks on applicants, but a half-dozen of those investigators are uniformed officers who do double duty representing the department at career fairs and outreach events. They hit about 120 a year.

Senior police officer Zenobia Mack has been recruiting for seven years. "I learned a long time ago not to wear heels," she said. Imagine standing for half a day behind one of 100 tables crammed into a noisy college gymnasium or conference center, surrounded by hundreds of your counterparts extolling the virtues of the Peace Corps, Farm Credit Administration or Crestline Hotels & Resorts. Imagine patiently answering questions from 20-somethings who may be feigning interest just to score a keychain. Imagine finding

that occasional gem of an applicant. That's the job-fair circuit in a nutshell. Mack drove to the University of Virginia and back in one exhausting day, and all she had to show for it was an interest card filled out by one student.

"None of them wanted to be police," she lamented of the students in Charlottesville. "They had majors I'd never heard of!"

The George Mason University fair in Fairfax generated only 10 interest cards, but at least it's close to home.

The University of Maryland career fair, a month later, held more promise, since the College Park campus has a large criminal justice department. Katrina Abunassar, a 2005 graduate working as a financial analyst, stopped by the D.C. police booth. She'd really like to be a criminal investigator, but without the hassle of first becoming a patrol officer. "It's dangerous at times. I don't know if I can do that work," she said.

"You can step off a curb and break your ankle," said Mack, trying to assure her that police life is not especially hazardous. "We'll train you from the beginning to the end."

"My problem is safety," said Abunassar. "I want to be safe, but I want to do investigations."

That's a common refrain recruiters hear, perhaps born of too many millennials having made too many cop shows a staple of their television diet. They all want to join the SWAT team or be homicide detectives. Nobody yearns to be a beat cop, a *real* cop. Some are surprised to learn they'll have to work nights and weekends.

Jose Bustamante, a senior criminal justice major, introduced himself to Mack. He's the size of a defensive tackle, polite, well-spoken and bilingual: prime-cut police material. Bustamante had his eye on several local departments.

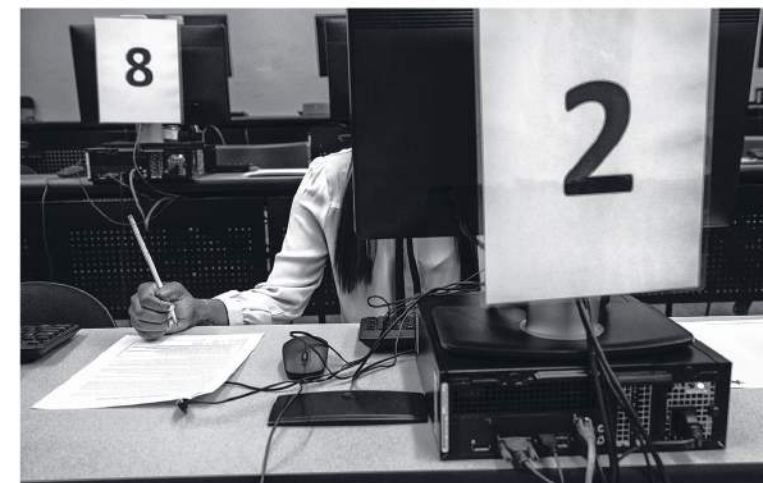
"We're hiring," said Mack. "The process will be, like, four, five or six months." She handed him her business card.

Bustamante was living with his parents in Potomac, Md. He had a practical question: Would he have to move? Mack told him there's no residency requirement, and she advised him to keep living at home. "Save money while you can."

At the end of the day, nine interest cards were completed but no applications submitted. (Bustamante didn't pan out. His mother dissuaded him from pursuing a police career, at least for now. He said she is uncomfortable with him carrying a gun and "telling people what to do.")

The can't-miss event on the recruiting calendar is the Spring Job & Internship Fair at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in Manhattan. John Jay graduates have a reputation for being mature and motivated. Many come from law enforcement families. D.C. police sent Mack and three officers to New York City, double the usual career-fair contingent. More than 1,000 students and 105 employers packed Haaren Hall Gym, home of the Bloodhounds basketball team. Many recruiters had guns strapped to their hips. For several hours this may have been the safest place in America.

You could walk around the gym and audio-surf sales pitches. A Fairfax County police recruiter liked to stress the department has the support of "a majority of our residents" and "we *love* military guys," although Fairfax is strict about officers having tattoos. At the Norfolk Police Department booth they emphasized their rapid-hire policy: "You won't be on a waiting list three or four years." The Dallas



From top: Mass Processing Day, D.C. police's twice-monthly cattle call for new cops, draws few people. A candidate takes an electronic test. Candidates prepare for the department's physical-ability test.



Police Department aimed straight for the pocketbook: “Our main selling point is cost of living.” A recruitment officer for the Fort Worth Police Department boasted that it has “the biggest indoor shooting range” in the country: “We have the FBI coming to train!”

D.C. Sgt. Raul Mendez, who was born in the Bronx, was locked in conversation with overachiever Nicole Betro, who is trilingual (English, Arabic and Spanish) and attending New York Law School while earning her master’s degree in forensic psychology at John Jay. Betro’s “end goal” is to be a profiler of serial killers.

Mendez tried his hardest to reel her in. There are job openings in the District, he said. A 28-week police academy class starts every month. “Throughout the United States, we have different testing centers, okay? This will save you time. Have you been to D.C.? [She hasn’t.] You have to come see the nation’s capital! You like art? [She does.] We have plenty of museums. Everything is free, by the way. D.C. is very diverse. It’s only 3½ hours from New York by car. Come down! Take the bus or train. ...”

No sale. Betro had her heart set on the FBI. But this wasn’t the University of Virginia. Mendez and his colleagues racked up 76 interest cards, and 14 students inquired about internships. By fall, 31 John Jay graduates had applied.

Not enough reliable data has been collected over an extended period to allow for drilling deep into the recruiting malaise. Nelson Lim, executive director of the Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania and a senior sociologist at RAND Corp., said this makes it difficult to isolate causes and effects. Lim added, however, that the landscape is generally shaped by three variables: the strength of the economy, how aggressively the military is hiring and “the impression people have about policing.” The August 2014 fatal shooting of Michael Brown by a police officer in Ferguson, Mo. — and similar incidents in Cleveland, New York, Baltimore and Chicago, to name just a few — influenced that third factor. But how profoundly and how permanently?

Ben Haiman believes in the so-called Ferguson effect, but only short-term. Example: In July D.C. police interest card submissions were down 20 percent after the killings of eight officers in Dallas and Baton Rouge but bounced back within several weeks. Maj. James Handley, Baltimore City Police director of recruiting, is a Ferguson effect skeptic; he is also a Freddie Gray effect skeptic. But Handley acknowledged Baltimore feels the recruiting pinch, too. Applications slid 50 percent between 2011 and 2015. This summer the department explored greener pastures by making a recruiting trip to Puerto Rico, where 764 islanders took the police admission test in 12 days, 80 more than took it in Maryland during the prior six months.

New York City, which saw about a 25 percent drop in applicants taking its police admissions test in 2014, is about to unveil a social media recruiting campaign geared to millennials. “We are definitely engaging that audience,” says Assistant Chief Kim Royster.

The situation in the District and many other cities has been compounded by what Haiman described as “the end of the 1980s drug-epidemic hiring boom.” In 2011 then-Chief Cathy Lanier told the D.C. Council that a wave of those cops would begin aging out of the department within five years. She requested money and resources to keep it fully staffed at 4,000 officers. Her warning went unheeded.

In October 2015 alone, D.C. police lost about 65 officers to retirement. While the peak of the wave has passed, said Haiman, the exodus won’t subside until late 2017.

Fortunately, Lanier took some remedial actions independent of the council. In 2009 she decided the department needed to automate. Haiman, then working for the human resources management division, was asked to write the programming codes for a preliminary digital records system. It launched in 2010 and included an online application portal, a first step in modernizing recruitment. In 2011 Haiman was put in charge of coordinating citizen volunteers. In that capacity he crossed paths with Maria Johnson Cicala, a retired vice president of diversity for Fannie Mae.

Johnson Cicala offered to analyze the department’s recruiting practices. She devoted at least 20 hours a week for most of 2012 and 2013, often conferring with Haiman in late-night phone conversations. She persuaded MPD to adopt a more corporate approach. She suggested putting less emphasis on time-consuming job fairs and monitored the department’s online advertising, concluding it was too scattershot. Her recommendation: Double down on cost-efficient niche sites such as Military.com and PoliceOne.com.

“Dozens of websites got dropped. I cleaned house,” she said. In an attempt to humanize the department, she and Haiman created a poster campaign built around the slogan “It’s a great time to be MPD,” featuring officers with such duties as bike patrol and canine corps.

The push to streamline recruiting gained momentum when Phil Honoré heard about a company in Washington state that developed a software package for managing data associated with institutional background checks. It goes by the acronym eSOPH (electronic statement of personal history). If the company had a sense of humor, it would have named the system eDOP: end dependency on paperwork.

Haiman fell in love with the program and got purchasing approval. Last December the recruiting division went paperless. A couple dozen people used to make entries in an applicant’s “bluebook” folder, each pair of hands a potential source of delay. Honoré said eSOPH has saved “hundreds of thousands of dollars” in paper costs. More important, it shaved four to six weeks off the processing time of a typical job candidate. “It’s a game changer,” he said. Why? One aspect of police recruiting has remained constant over the years: The majority of applicants accept the first offer.

In December, D.C. police also made another break with the past. Lanier scrapped the generic written aptitude test, replacing it with a multiple-choice exam based on video vignettes of real-life policing situations. Applicants choose what they think is the best course of action in each scenario. No more junior-high-school-level math and



26%
Approximate decline in D.C. police applications from 2013 to 2014. Applications dipped another 28 percent from 2014 to 2015.

Above: Candidates at the police academy watch a cadet drag a 140-pound dummy.

Opposite page, from top: During the physical-ability test, a candidate weaves around cones; others get a peek at the challenges they’ll face during the test; firing an unloaded pistol is one of the test’s last requirements.



Above: Candidates are shown firearm techniques at Metropolitan Police Academy in Southwest Washington. Applicants must pass a written test and obstacle course and medical, psychological and polygraph exams, plus a background check. They must have earned 60 college credits or served in the military or other police department.
Top right: Phil Honoré, deputy director of D.C. police's Office of Recruiting.



50%
 Decline in
 police
 applications
 between
 2011 and
 2015 in
 Baltimore.

grammar questions. The new test not only is a better predictor of job performance, it's produced and administered by a private company, National Testing Network, that has five locations in the District and 123 others nationwide. By offering multiple testing centers, the department expands its reach and lets applicants take the test at their convenience, making them feel more invested in the hiring process, more *courted*.

On Tuesday afternoons, Haiman, Honoré and Capt. Antonio Charland, director of the recruiting division, would meet at the downtown headquarters to discuss strategy and the latest hiring numbers. Every month 20 to 25 vacancies have to be filled at the academy. The department has never come up short, but final acceptances sometimes go down to the wire.

Charland was transferred to the division in April. By the July meeting he was firmly on message. "You're dealing with applicants like any corporation or business," he said, adding that the department has to hop on the good ones quickly. Haiman cited a pertinent statistic: Thanks largely to eSOPH, the average time it takes a new hire to advance from Mass Processing Day — the twice-monthly cattle call for new cops that includes basic screening — "to sitting in the academy" has been reduced to 2.7 months.

Lanier put a premium on recruiting right up until her departure for the NFL in September. In her waning weeks on the

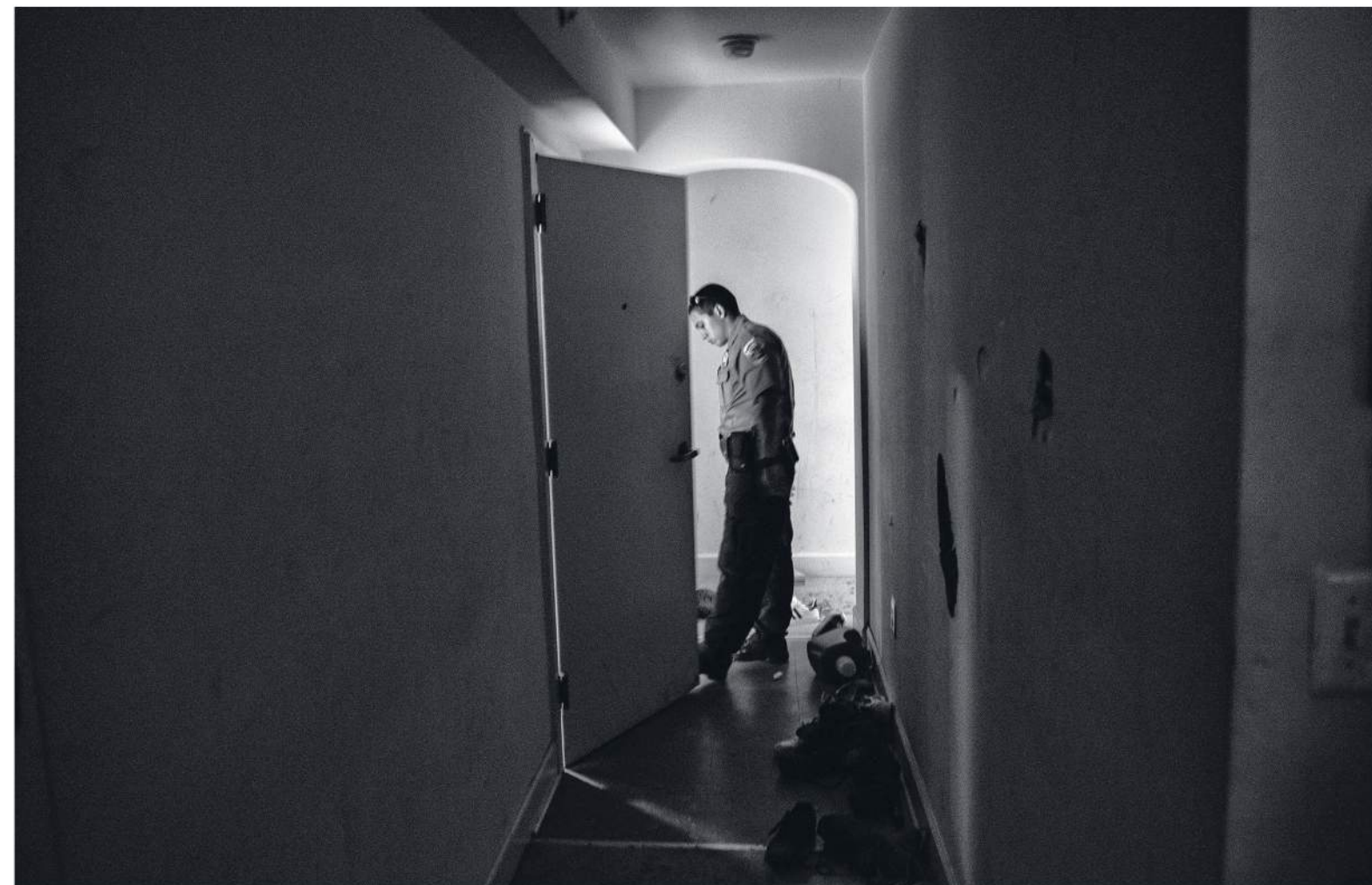


From left: Sgt. Archer Ashley at the scene of a shooting in Northeast Washington. Rookie officer Michael Pearson looks through an apartment in Northeast after responding to a call about a woman threatening to stab her mother.

job she granted the recruiting team permission to launch a website dedicated exclusively to recruiting. Haiman said the site will promote “brand recognition” by using “industry best practices” and “leveraging technology.” Whatever it means, that’s the kind of talk seldom, if ever, heard at police headquarters. The new website should be up by January. Visitors will be able to get instant answers to questions, watch videos of officers in action and effortlessly put a job application in motion.

“This is part of giving them everything in one-stop shopping,” said Charland. More improvements will be coming. Charland held up his smartphone. He’d like to see an app that would allow job hunters “to apply right on this phone.”

On a Monday morning in early August, Ben Haiman was at his desk at police headquarters, pecking away on his laptop. Monday is the busiest day of the week for job inquiries and applications. People return to work after a relaxing weekend, Haiman said, “and realize just how much they hate their jobs.” By the end of the day, there would be 51 new interest cards in the system.



Haiman went to the D.C. police website and headed for the live chat room, which was introduced only 12 days earlier. So far it had been performing beautifully. How did he know? He sometimes logged in and answered chat questions himself. “I do it on the weekend when I’m bored,” he said.

He checked the real-time web traffic. “Eighteen people are looking at the site right now,” he said. “One is from South Africa and one from London. Since we launched live chat we’ve done 120 chats and 2,834 people were offered the opportunity to chat. There have been 6,059 page views of the website.”

Gerson Jimenez — a 29-year-old Army veteran from Sterling, Va., who served six years as a military police officer and did two tours in Afghanistan — may have been one of those 18 people. In late July, he joined 48 other aspirants at the Metropolitan Police Academy in Southwest Washington for Mass Processing Day. Jimenez appeared to be an ideal candidate. However, Haiman — who would soon be put in charge of volunteer coordination in a department restructuring (but keep his hand in recruiting) — has learned there’s no way to predict who’ll make a good police officer based on first impressions. It’s as scientific as

“throwing darts at a dart board.”

Jimenez passed the obstacle course and written exam. He was now undergoing the requisite background check — but with some extra incentive. Out of the blue one day his 5-year-old daughter, Genesis, asked, “When I grow up, can I be a police officer with you?”

That got Jimenez thinking about a possible package deal.

“I’ll be the first one in my family to be a police officer,” he said. “For my daughter to follow in my footsteps in the same department? That would be amazing!” ■

Tom Dunkel is the author of “Color Blind: The Forgotten Team That Broke Baseball’s Color Line.” To comment on this story, email wpmagazine@washpost.com or visit washingtonpost.com/magazine.