

Is our police department biased?

The Chicago Police Department has a double assignment concerning racial discrimination: not to practice it; and to satisfy critical observers that it does not practice it. How well it meets the former assignment is a matter of controversy. There is no doubt that the Police Department has failed the latter assignment. Following critical reports by both official and private agencies, the Department of Justice has now brought suit, charging racial bias in hiring and promotion practices.

The issue does not concern stated policy. Deputy Police Supt. Patrick V. Needham has replied to the suit by saying the department "does not discriminate against any minority in any area." A general order signed by Supt. James B. Conlisk Jr. and dated March 22, 1972, reads in part, "Department personnel will never show any bias or prejudice against any individual or group because of race, religion, color, national ancestry, or economic status." The Police Department is publicly committed to a nondiscriminatory policy. In so far as there is racial bias in practice, it has entered a gap between the ideal and the fact.

The current suit may surprise the general public, but it can be no surprise to the Police Department. Acting on complaints that recruiting practices were discriminatory, the federal Law Enforcement Assistance Administration [LEAA] issued a report last August which said the written tests of applicants for appointments as Chicago policemen "tend to keep a disproportionate number of minority group members off the police force." The report recommended suspension of the civil service written examination as a means of selection.

Last May, the LEAA informed Renault A. Robinson of the Afro-American Patrolmen's League, which had charged bias, that dealings with Chicago Police Department "have not resulted in a commitment . . . to be in voluntary compliance" with LEAA guidelines and that LEAA had referred the matter to

the Department of Justice for its action.

The Chicago police have a problem, either in deserving confidence or in getting it, if not both. Distrust of the Chicago police is in some segments of the population so deep that hardly any derogatory statement is too extreme to be believed. Many more are unwilling to take police statements at face value.

At least, the Chicago Police Department needs to improve its reputation; at most, it needs to make big changes in its practices. Its most pressing critic at the moment is no less than the federal government, which is questioning if Chicago police qualify to receive funds from the LEAA. Money is at stake, as well as reputation for even-handed public service.

If the Chicago Police Department deserves a good rating for its current personnel practices, it should so demonstrate — not only by assertion but by open discussion of relevant evidence; not only to its own satisfaction, but to that of others also. If the LEAA has jumped to conclusions on no better basis than numerical quotas, let that be shown. The percentage of black policemen can be smaller than the percentage of black residents for reasons other than bias. What if qualified blacks do not apply in substantial numbers? No doubt many blacks [and whites] who can meet police standards can qualify for employment more attractive to them. Getting an arbitrary quota of blacks into police ranks is less important than getting well qualified people whatever their race.

There is no precisely reliable means of recognizing and predicting potential success in police work. Racial classification is no such index, and it would be as wrong to use it as an automatic qualifier as to use it as an automatic disqualifier. If this sort of argument fits the facts and accounts for them, the Chicago Police Department should say so, and with vigor. Part of its duty is to meet challenges with evidence and candor rather than with haughty and silent disdain.