Cities find police staffing is no easy proposition

Surge in crime, 24/7 spotlight make some reluctant to join the force

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The Chicago Police Department on Wednesday announced it will hire nearly 1,000 new officers over the next two years, an ambitious plan at a moment when departments across the country are grappling with poor officer morale amid criticism of policing in black communities.

The Chicago plan raises the question: Why would anyone want to sign up to be a cop now?

FBI

Director James Comey, big-city police chiefs and academics have all raised the concern that some big cities — including Chicago, which has already recorded more than 500 murders this year — may be witnessing a surge in crime partly because officers fear being scrutinized in the next viral video.
“More and more, departments are finding that people are reluctant to consider policing as a career, because of the tension that exists in communities across the country,” said Darrel Stephens, executive director of the Major Cities Chiefs Police Association. “It’s particularly tough in communities of color. The reality is those are exactly the people we need.”

The issue is a big one for departments big and small throughout the country, who are pressing to attract more minority recruits. Just 29% of black respondents expressed confidence in police compared with 58% of white respondents, according to polling data published by Gallup in July.

Chicago may be in a better place than some cities. About 71% of applicants of the more than 14,000 applicants who took the police exam earlier this year were minorities, according to the city.

But other cities are simply finding it is difficult to find qualified applicants to fill vacant slots, or to keep the experienced cops they already have.

In Ferguson, Mo., which entered a federal consent decree following a Justice Department investigation that was spurred by the 2014 fatal police shooting of 18-year-old Michael Brown, the department has 13 vacancies on its 49-member force.

In Phoenix, which last year lifted a seven-year hiring freeze due to budgetary concerns, the city is hiring about 25 officers per month as it tries to gradually fill more than 430 vacancies. But the push to staff up has been somewhat negated by what the department considers “abnormally high” attrition rates.

Lt. Anthony Lopez, of the Phoenix department, said the 2,800-officer department lost 185 officers last year and is on pace to lose the same number this year.

Lopez said while the current climate is not having an impact on recruitment, it may be having an effect on longtime officers' calculations — some who were able to achieve retirement savings goals early as a result of overtime opportunities caused by the hiring freeze.

In Dallas, where four city police officers and a rapid transit officer were assassinated in July at a protest, the department has long had difficulty retaining officers as surrounding agencies have effectively recruited them away with better pay.
In announcing the plan to hire 970 officers, Chicago Police Superintendent Eddie Johnson said the “pressure to perform is greater than ever before (with) cameras and videos means we are always and constantly in the spotlight.”

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