



Extra Spacious *BRAND NEW* Apartment Homes
 In Downtown L.A.'s vibrant Arts District
 Fully Upgraded One & Two Bedroom Flats
 & Two-story Loft Floor Plans
Fantastic move-in specials offered!

Just the Truth

LAPD recruits are having trouble with new lie-detector tests

Bobbi Murray

published: March 15, 2001

After lagging behind other law-enforcement agencies that routinely give polygraph tests to potential recruits, the Los Angeles Police Department started using lie-detector tests to screen recruits in February.

One month later, the LAPD is faced with some eyebrow-raising statistics: Out of 59 candidates, 29 failed to show up for the test and 13 of the remaining 30 flunked, according to Phyllis Lynes, chief of the Public Safety Employment Division of the city's personnel department. She says it's safe to assume the no-shows got cold feet, though it's possible some rescheduled their appointments.

LAPD Lieutenant Horace Frank says that the 59 recruits were already engaged in an involved hiring process when they received notices that they would need to schedule a polygraph test, a requirement that was part of the "integrity package" recommended by the department as part of reforms prompted by the Rampart corruption scandal. The drop-out rate is a good sign, says Frank. "If there's a reason for individuals to de-select themselves when they find out they have to take a polygraph test, it's good that they do that. From our standpoint, it's good because we proposed the integrity package."

The test deals with such issues as past employment, possible drug use and financial matters.

"This comes at a time when it's incredibly difficult to recruit new officers to the department," says City Councilman Mike Feuer, a candidate for city attorney who heard the figures last week when the Budget and Finance Committee reviewed a request from the LAPD for \$1 million to expand advertising for LAPD recruits. "It also makes you wonder about the numbers of Police Academy graduates who would have passed if the testing had been in place before. Feuer acknowledges, however, that it's difficult to infer much about current recruits based on the pattern. "There's a much broader issue about the quality of our applicant pool," he adds.

Frank agrees and notes that the number of graduates from a Police Academy class has dropped from "90-plus in the heyday" to as few as 30 to 40. A class of trainees graduates an average of once a month.



Feuer says that L.A. isn't the only big city having a tough time recruiting qualified candidates, and although he concedes that Rampart is a factor here, he cites the strong economy as the main reason. "It's not that people couldn't get anything else. It's just that they had so many options, they see the pros and cons of joining the police department in a different light," Feuer says. A flat economic outlook could change that, and Feuer favors providing incentives, such as student-loan forgiveness programs, to attract a more educated pool of recruits.

Frank says that the department plans to resume recruiting outside California. Last year, half the 18,000 people who took the written LAPD test were from out of state, he says.

The lack of candidates is just the latest obstacle preventing Mayor Richard Riordan from coming through on his eight-year-old campaign promise to boost LAPD officer numbers to 10,000. Some blame a hiring speed-up for relaxing standards and opening the door to the abuses detailed in testimony surrounding the Rampart scandal.

Feuer calls the polygraph tests a good step toward ensuring the veracity of law-enforcement officers. Not only do tests uncover past behavior of potential officers, he says, but they show whether or not they will tell the truth about it.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California is not impressed with polygraph testing as a significant police reform, and is concerned about whether the tests are fair and accurate, according to spokesman Christopher Calhoun. Dr. Edward I. Gelb, a former LAPD lieutenant and past president of the American Polygraph Association, disagrees. "You cannot establish ground truth in the real world, so you'll never know the accuracy of the polygraph. You can only go on laboratory studies, and laboratory studies indicate a validity in the 90th percentile," says Gelb. He stands by lie-detector tests as an effective, relatively low-cost tool for the LAPD to check out candidates' backgrounds: "Anecdotally I can tell you -- and I stopped counting at 50,000 [polygraphs] -- a lot of people aren't qualified to be police officers."