

The San Diego Daily Transcript

DAs can do more to diversify ranks, Dumanis says

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In the aftermath of a study showing that minorities are heavily underrepresented among California prosecutors, San Diego County District Attorney Bonnie Dumanis has said her office, and others statewide, can do more to diversify their personnel.

The review was conducted by the Stanford Criminal Justice Center after the killings of unarmed black men in communities nationwide, including Ferguson, Mo., drew a heightened focus to prosecutors' treatment of racial minorities.

The study found that Latinos are the most underrepresented group among the state's prosecutors employed by district attorneys. While Latinos make up 38.6 percent of the state's population, they comprise just 9.4 percent of the state's prosecutors.

Asians are slightly underrepresented when it comes to total prosecutors, but represent just 9 percent of prosecutors with supervisory titles, an underrepresentation of 5.2 percentage points.

Whites make up nearly 38 percent of the state's population, but comprise almost 70 percent of California prosecutors.

Dumanis' office exceeds the statewide average when it comes to the percentage of Latino prosecutors. Her office reported that 42 out of 318 deputy district attorneys identify as Latino, which comes to 13.2 percent, almost four percentage points above the state average.

The San Diego County DA's office is slightly below the state average for its percentage of black and Asian prosecutors. The office reports that 4.4 percent of its full-time prosecutors are black, 1.4 percent below the state average. Meanwhile, 11 percent of Dumanis' prosecutors are Asian, about 1 point below the benchmark. Whites make up 70.1 percent of the office's full-time prosecutors, just more than 1 percent above the state average.

"In San Diego, we've made great strides in the past decade increasing diversity in our office so it's more representative of the community we serve, but there's no doubt we can all do better," Dumanis said in a prepared statement.

As part of her efforts to increase diversity, Dumanis said she has expanded recruitment to reach as many applicants as possible. Hiring panels for entry-level deputy district

attorney positions include a diverse group of lawyers, including those who can speak foreign languages.

Dumanis has also tried to address the so-called “pipeline problem,” a paucity of minorities in the California legal profession as a whole and in the ranks of law school graduates. Her office’s “Diversity Pipeline Program” seeks to raise student awareness and interest, as well encourage students — especially those from underrepresented populations — to pursue higher education. The program includes collaboration with San Diego Superior Court, the San Diego Unified School District and the Federal Probation Office.

“It’s important that people see themselves reflected in government and in the courtroom,” Dumanis said. “It helps build trust and confidence in the criminal justice system.”

The underrepresentation of women of color in the legal profession has been a longtime problem, both statewide and locally, said Deborah Dixon, president of Lawyers Club of San Diego. Lawyers Club, which works to advance the status of women in the law and society, is studying why there are not more minority women practicing law in San Diego County. Dixon highlighted that previous research has suggested that women of color who enter the legal industry do not stay in the sector as long as other groups because they feel isolated. Efforts to improve the retention of minority women in the legal ranks could bolster the percentage of minority prosecutors, she said.

“Maybe the DA’s office, as we would encourage all employers, could focus on education about inclusion within its own culture,” said Dixon, a senior trial attorney at **Gomez Trial Attorneys**.

The authors of the Stanford study said due to the amount of power prosecutors wield and the discretion they can exercise, it is “cause for concern if they do not reflect the diversity of the public.” But the study does not address any potential solutions for increasing diversity in district attorney’s offices, stating that more research is needed.

“Despite these limitations, we hope that by providing detailed information about the race and gender of prosecutors in California we can facilitate the same public discussion and scholarly research about diversity that exists for law enforcement officers,” the study’s authors wrote.