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How to put more police on Oakland streets

From the SF Chronicle **OPEN FORUM**

The vast backlog of cases in the Oakland Police Department Special Victims Unit is an ugly black eye for the city.

The special victims unit, which investigates sexual assault and child abuse cases, has more than 3,000 open cases - some of them years old. Almost 1,800 of those are sexual assault cases.

The Police Department has worked to improve the capacity of the unit, but for the last few years, the unit has made do with only five investigators. Five people, however dedicated and capable, can handle only so many cases. The low level of resources is not enough for the victims who are watching their chance at justice slip away.

There is one place we can go to find more investigators - the Internal Affairs Division.

The Oakland Police Department Internal Affairs Division has 28 investigators, almost six times as many as the special victims unit. Internal Affairs is an important division, but unlike the homicide or special victims units, it's not one that has to be fully staffed by sworn Oakland police investigators.

Given our desperate need for sworn investigators in violent crime units, Oakland should follow the lead of other major cities and hire professional civilian investigators to handle complaints against police officers.

While we're at it, Oakland also could get more regular officers on the street by using civilians or retired officers for desk jobs. We don't need sworn officers handing out firearms at the gun range or taking traffic incident reports when they could be responding to calls for service and preventing crime.

Across the country, cities such as San Francisco and New York have already civilianized many Internal Affairs functions. In San Francisco's Office of Citizen Complaints, civilian attorneys, private investigators and even former journalists investigate everything from allegations of rudeness by an officer to use of deadly force.

Using civilians is much cheaper than using sworn officers, who tend to be higher up on the Police Department's pay scale. And taking Internal Affairs out of the Oakland Police Department would clarify the line between officers and the investigators who hold them accountable for misconduct.

The concentration of investigators in Internal Affairs is a result of the Oakland Police Department's not-too-distant history of not investigating its own. In the past, Internal Affairs did a poor job of holding fellow officers accountable. A few years ago, for example, newly assigned commanders found boxes containing about 700 inquiries and possible complaints of misconduct that were never investigated.

The settlement agreement that ended the Riders police misconduct case in 2003 was designed to bring accountability to a department that had become sloppy in its management of taxpayer dollars and lax in its oversight of police effectiveness. Among the provisions in the agreement is a commonsense directive: Complaints against officers must be handled in a timely manner, and Internal Affairs must be staffed accordingly.

Some inside the department who benefited from the old system of loose oversight have blamed the Riders settlement for everything from the lack of police response time to the Special Victims case backlog to the fact that the Warriors didn't make the playoffs this year.

But the problem is not the Riders settlement and its mandate for police accountability. The problem is that the city of Oakland has been reluctant to look outside the status quo - or in this case, outside of Police Department ranks - for resources to solve and prevent violent crime.