

THE PORTLAND POLICE BUREAU'S STOP DATA

An Independent Analysis

Executive Summary

January 2008

In 2000, the City of Portland Blue Ribbon Panel on Racial Profiling recommended that all Portland Police officers participate in collecting data on traffic stops, including perceived race, perceived gender, estimated age, reason for the stop and outcome. The bureau began collecting this stop data in 2001, and has published statistical reports on this data in 2002, 2004, 2005 and 2006.

In September 2007, the Portland Police Association asked Dr. Brian L. Withrow, a nationally recognized expert on racial profiling, to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the Portland Police Bureau's Traffic Stops Data Collection 2006 Statistical Report. The goals of the analysis are: 1) to evaluate the ability of the stop data to describe the enforcement activities of the Portland Police Bureau, and 2) to determine if the data supports or does not support allegations of racial profiling.

Dr. Withrow commends the collection of stop data, however, finds that the current data's usefulness for analysis is compromised for the following reasons:

- » The racial and ethnic categories in the stop data are not consistent with those in the benchmark used by the Portland Police Bureau to estimate the driving population.
- » The presence of or lack of racial profiling cannot be determined from the data because the stop data does not correspond to the Portland Police Bureau's formal definition of racial profiling.
- » Because the reported reasons for the stops are nominally measured and nondescript, no correlation can be established between the flagrancy of driver's observed behavior and the punitiveness (e.g. warning versus arrest) of the stop's outcome.
- » Because the reported reasons for the stops are nominally measured, the officers' motivation and level of discretion for initiating the stop cannot be determined.
- » The information relating to the disposition of the stops provides little insight because it does not measure the factors that are well known to affect officer decision-making.
- » The stop data provide very little insight into the officers' motivation, level of discretion and justification for conducting searches.
- » The search hit rates reported in the stop data do not appear to indicate that the race or ethnicity of the drivers are influential factors in an officer's decision to search.
- » The evaluation of the stop data at the precinct level is non-informative and does not consider the effect officer deployment may have on the overall findings.

Given these concerns, the traffic stop data collection reports conducted by the Portland Police Bureau do not properly document and describe the routine enforcement activities of Portland's police officers, and they do not provide sufficient evidence one way or the other of racial profiling. Stop studies can be of immense value to administrators and elected officials because they, often for the first time, provide insight into the practice of policing. However, in this case, the objective – to document and describe the often-complicated nature of traffic stops and routine enforcement behavior – was not achieved.

In addition, the lack of any context for or basic analysis of the complex data makes it easy for laypersons to misconstrue the data. The value of a stop study lies precisely in its ability to describe the contexts in which

enforcement decisions are made. Appropriately developed stop studies can also be responsive to alleviating or confirming public concerns about racial profiling. Unfortunately, Portland's annual stop studies do neither.

In concluding his analysis, Dr. Withrow recommends how the Portland Police Bureau can improve its collection practices, data and analysis with the end goal of having useful, supportable information to adequately prove or disprove the presence of racial profiling in Portland. Specifically, Withrow suggests:

- » Implementing an auditing mechanism to measure completeness and accuracy of future stop data collections.
- » Expanding the types of contacts included in future stop data collections.
- » Including information on juveniles stopped in future stop data collections.
- » Utilizing racial and ethnic categories that are consistent with those used in population-based benchmarks.
- » Expanding the level of detail and the amount of information collected in stop data to aid in better documentation and more adequate, effective analysis.
- » Considering an alternative to current population-based benchmarking strategy.
- » Evaluating annual stop data at the district level.

Generally, Dr. Withrow suggests that the research objectives be more explicit and better understood; that the data collection be carried out in a way that ensures consistent, accurate, robust information; and, that proper analysis be performed and included in the final report. Taking these steps should move the Portland Police Bureau, as well as both its supporters and critics, that much closer to accurately determining the extent to which, if any, racial profiling takes place in Portland.