

Traffic searches studied Statistics on - Hispanics stopped by police raise questions

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Highland Park police officers searched more whites than Hispanics after traffic stops last year, but a look at the Dallas County driving population shows Hispanics might have been over-searched and whites may have been under-searched, according to a 2003 racial profiling report compiled by the Highland Park Department of Public Safety.

Highland Park DPS Chief Darrell Fant presented the report to the Town Council on Monday. Public safety committee members previewed the report on Feb. 25.

Dr. Timothy Bray, an assistant professor of criminology at the University of Texas at Dallas, said that while Highland Park police may not be profiling any particular group, someone could look at DPS statistics and make a case that the department is profiling Hispanics.

While Hispanics represent less than 19 percent of the driving population in Dallas County, 41 percent of the searches conducted by Highland Park officers were of Hispanics, according to the report.

In comparison, white drivers represent 52.7 percent of the county's driving population, but 41.7 percent of searches by Highland Park officers were of white drivers.

In theory, Dr. Bray said, the search percentages should reflect the population.

Chief Fant said Hispanics may be over-searched because of socioeconomic factors outside officers' control. Drivers who don't have their license or have an outstanding warrant go directly to jail if they're stopped in Highland Park.

"We're one of the few agencies where that's mandatory," Chief Fant said, explaining that nearly all searches are conducted at the jail after arrests.

Agencies are required to collect data on traffic stops that result in traffic citations or arrests. Highland Park collects data on every contact.

The law also requires departments to create a complaint-reporting system and to implement policies and training for officers to prevent racial profiling.

The problem with any numbers, Dr. Bray said, is that there's no way to tell who is driving through Highland Park at any given time.

"At the very base level we have traffic counts," he said. "They [traffic counts] don't know anything about the race of the drivers, about the race of the car owner. We have nothing that guides us as to whether or not those numbers are high or low."

The results come as law enforcement agencies comply with a new state law that requires annual reports about racial profiling. A 2001 law banned the use of racial or ethnic profiling as a basis for law enforcement action including stops, searches and arrests.

Nobody filed a complaint against a Highland Park officer in 2003.

The University Park Police Department didn't receive any complaints either, but Chief Gary Adams recently commissioned an independent study to determine whether officers use racial profiling in traffic stops.

Chief Adams' announcement came after the Texas Criminal Justice Reform Coalition and several civil rights groups reported that University Park officers are over three times more likely to search Hispanic drivers than whites and 1.5 times more likely to search blacks than whites.

The report was based on 2002 traffic data submitted by 413 police and sheriff's departments statewide. The analysis, compiled by a University of Texas economics professor, found that three of every four agencies reported stopping blacks and Hispanics at higher rates than whites, and six of every seven reported searching blacks and Hispanics at higher rates than whites.

Several police departments have criticized the report's methodology.

Dr. Bray said that while the numbers may not be accurate, the value of any profiling report "isn't that it's done. It's what we do with it."

Officers should look at these numbers and ask themselves the times and places where most citations are issued and by which officers, he

said.

"These numbers can mask the real issues," Dr. Bray said. "Nine times out of ten when you're talking about racial profiling, you're talking about one officer or one unit."

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