

RHODE ISLAND TRAFFIC STOP STATISTICS
DATA COLLECTION STUDY

INITIAL FINDINGS REPORT

Jack McDevitt
Janice Iwama
Lisa Bailey-Laguerre

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INSTITUTE ON RACE AND JUSTICE

Executive Summary

Over the past decade, racial profiling has been recognized as an issue of national concern faced by American law enforcement. The public has raised questions as to whether police intentionally target persons because of their race and/or ethnicity in various communities across the United States. At the same time, disparities found in aggressive traffic stop practices, even if unintentional, come under scrutiny by community members, civil rights groups, and policymakers. Starting in 2012, the Rhode Island Department of Transportation (RIDOT) in collaboration with law enforcement agencies across the state began transmitting data on the racial demographics of motorists stopped by the police. Overall, 153,891 traffic stops that took place from January 1, 2013 through September 30, 2013 were analyzed.

The present report offers an opportunity for community members and law enforcement to assess racial disparities in stops and post-stop activities for jurisdictions across the state. The purpose of the study was to identify whether law enforcement agencies in Rhode Island engaged in disparate practices during traffic stops. Additionally, the study provides community members and law enforcement with the ability to identify areas of progress that have been made since the last traffic stop data collection took place in 2004-2005. The present report also offers some recommendations to community members and law enforcement in how to address areas where racial disparities exist in order to begin the discussion of concerns in traffic stop practices.

The final report is divided into five sections. First, an introduction is provided with an overview to the background of the study, development of the data collection, and methods used to conduct the analysis. Second, a description of the statewide characteristics is provided along with general patterns of traffic stops. Third, we begin to explain how racial disparities are measured in traffic stops with the utilization of various benchmarks and describe where some of the racial disparities exist using certain benchmarks. In the fourth section, we measure racial disparities in post-stop activity starting with citations and then looking at search activity. Finally, the report provides a summary of the primary findings in addition to recommendations on how to proceed with addressing racial disparities in traffic stops.

Background of the Study

After receiving a grant under Section 1906 of SAFETEA-LU from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), RIDOT began planning a process to collect and transmit data on traffic stops statewide to determine if racial profiling is occurring and identify appropriate program recommendations. In conjunction with the data collection, an advisory committee was developed made up of community members, law enforcement, and interested stakeholders to provide guidance in the data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the findings from the traffic stop data. Additionally, RIDOT awarded the Institute on Race and Justice (IRJ) at Northeastern University an award, alongside Ledge Light Technologies, to assist with the data collection, transmission, and analysis of the traffic stop data.

Starting in the spring of 2012, the advisory committee met monthly to review the status of the data collection, transmission, and preliminary findings thus far in order to address any questions or comments regarding the data collection efforts and analyses. In an effort to ensure the accuracy of the data, the IRJ disseminated a report to each agency with their traffic stop data to confirm that the numbers reflected those that were being collected by the agency. In addition, members from RIDOT and IRJ met with law enforcement representatives to address any questions or concerns about their data and the interpretations of the information.

Based on data from traffic stops that took place from January 1, 2013 through September 30, 2013, the major findings of the initial analyses were presented to members of the public at three community meetings across the state to address any questions or concerns communities might have with regards to the interpretation of the findings. Once the feedback received from community members, law enforcement, and other stakeholders was incorporated into the report, IRJ submitted a draft with the initial findings to RIDOT in December 2013. Below is a summary of some of the findings included in the following report.

Initial Findings

Preliminary findings from data collected for traffic stops during the nine-month study period, January 1, 2013 through September 30, 2013, reflect similar statewide patterns as found in the 2004-2005 study. Although some agencies show significant changes from the racial disparities found in the previous study, the majority of agencies continue to display the same level of disparity as before. For a few agencies where disparities have increased, this could result from a number of reasons such as both residential and driving population changes, operational adjustments, training, and changing personnel. Therefore, changes found in the level of disparity since the 2004-2005 study should be interpreted with caution, but lead to further discussion between community members and law enforcement agencies.

- The report analyzed 153,891 traffic stops, which took place across the State of Rhode Island between January 1, 2013 and September 30, 2013.
- The most frequent drivers stopped were males, under 31 years of age, who did not live in the jurisdiction where they were stopped.
- In 2013, 77.1% of stops were of white drivers, 11% of stops were of Hispanic drivers, 9.8% of stops were of African American drivers, 2% of stops were of Asian/Pacific Island drivers and 0.1% of stops were of Native American drivers.
- Most drivers were stopped for speeding (38%) and while much variation exists across jurisdictions, most of the drivers stopped received a citation (57.1%). Searches were rarely conducted in traffic stops (3.3%).

Racial and Ethnic Disparities

- When the analysis reviewed the racial and ethnic characteristics of driver stopped compared to an estimate of the drivers in a jurisdiction, in 30 communities more non-white drivers were stopped than would have been expected based on the driving population estimate. When compared to the results found in a previous Rhode Island traffic stop study, in 20 communities, the absolute differences in non-white stops compared to the driving population estimates were reduced while in 17 communities the disparities increased.
- When the analysis reviewed stops of residents compared to the residential population it revealed that in 23 communities in Rhode Island, non-white residents were more likely to be stopped than census data would have suggested.
- In nearly 80% of Rhode Island's jurisdictions (34 jurisdictions), non-white drivers were less likely to receive a citation than white drivers. Additionally, in 13 jurisdictions the proportion of non-whites receiving a citation has been reduced since the 2004-2005 study.

- Due to the small number of searches conducted in many jurisdictions, data on searches should be viewed with caution. When we look at all searches together, in all but three Rhode Island jurisdictions non-white drivers were more likely to be searched than white drivers. When we restrict the analysis to discretionary searches, non-white drivers are still searched more often in 25 jurisdictions. When compared to the 2004-2005 study, it does appear that in 18 jurisdictions the disparity between non-white and white searches has been reduced. While many of these differences were very small this pattern calls for additional analysis.

Recommendations

Based on the initial findings presented in this report of traffic stops that took place from January 1, 2013 through September 30, 2013, we made the following recommendations:

- Each law enforcement agency in Rhode Island carefully reviews all analyses for their jurisdiction to see if there are areas of concern
- Where appropriate, each agency should compare their results to the results in communities they consider to be comparable in terms of demographics or policing orientation.
- For all communities with large disparities in any of the analyses presented in the report they should review the data in more detail to determine if the disparities are of concern. Some areas they might review include looking at the disparity by time of day (e.g. is one shift the cause of the disparity) and where available by police district or sector.
- After a thorough analysis the leadership of each agency should share the results with two primary groups with the officers in their agency so they can see what that data they have been providing is indicating about their enforcement activity. The second group is the community; law enforcement should seek out avenues to use this data to initiate a conversation with the community about biased policing.
- The conversations with the community can be intimidating but experience indicates that these conversations can go a long way to increasing trust and confidence in the police by various groups.
- Experience in other states indicates that a successful way of initiating these conversations would be to go to an existing community group at a regular meeting of that group.
- Agencies should continue systematic data collection on traffic stops to monitor patterns and disparities in traffic stops. Future data collection can improve their understanding of how policies and practices within the agency influence outcomes of traffic stops.