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New research questions traffic-stop data reflecting racial disparities

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New research published by an MU professor about the validity of state traffic-stop data calls into question whether racial profiling by the Columbia Police Department exists.

Several flaws about the attorney general's office's annual traffic-stop data report were presented during Thursday night's Columbia City Council work session focused on racial profiling and bias-free policing. Police officials also presented to the council their revised bias-free policing policy that goes into effect next week.

Others, however, still have concerns on whether this policy is doing enough.

Racial profiling has been a divisive topic in Columbia for years. Members of the racial equality and social justice group Race Matters, Friends called on Columbia Police Chief Ken Burton to resign in 2017 after he repeatedly expressed doubt about the existence of racial profiling in the Columbia Police Department.

But Burton has maintained that the data hasn't gone far enough to determine whether it's a problem in the city. He denied in 2016 that his department had a racial profiling problem, and has said since that there needs to be more research.

The numbers that Burton claims don't go far enough are part of the Missouri Attorney General's Office annual traffic-stop report. The office has collected and published traffic-stop data since 2000 to show the disparity rates of races for stops, searches, contraband and arrests.

The racial disparity index compares the percentage of traffic stops for a certain racial group to the percentage of the population for that race. A rate over 1 means the group is over-represented in stops. A number below 1 means the group is under-represented in stops.

In 2017, the disparity index for black drivers in Columbia was 3.28, higher than 2016's disparity index of 3.13.

Burton said in an interview with the Missourian last year that he was working with an MU professor to further analyze the data.

Recently published research by MU economics professor Jeffrey Milyo calls into question the validity of data that advocacy groups in Columbia say shows police officers racially profile. Burton confirmed Thursday after the work session that Milyo was the professor he previously referenced. He said Milyo came to him wanting to do the research. Milyo has a doctorate from Stanford and is a fellow at the Cato Institute, a think tank in Washington .

The Columbia Police Officers' Association has also said repeatedly that the annual reports don't point to racial profiling's existence. In a release sent to media ahead of Thursday's meeting, Dale Roberts wrote that CPOA "emphatically rejects the false narrative claiming any racial bias."

According to Milyo, the annual traffic-stop reports contain misleading information. Columbia Police Officer's Association president Dale Roberts presented highlights of Milyo's research during Thursday's work session. Roberts pointed out three flaws Milyo found with the data:

- The percentage of drivers who are a certain race does not necessarily equal the census numbers of a race, which is used in the annual reports.
- The annual report is based on the assumption that all ethnic and racial groups commit infractions at equal rates, but there's no data to support that.
- The annual report is based on officers easily able to see a driver's race at night. A "veil of darkness" prevents that, in reality.

Milyo's report also said the disparity index is "uninformative" about racial bias and disparity does not necessarily equate to bias.

In the annual traffic-stop report, all other races listed aside from black — Asian, Hispanic, Native American, white and other — have been below a disparity index of 1 since the report was first published in 2000.

But, the disparity index for black drivers has never dipped below 1.99. And since 2011, the rate has consistently crept up. Black drivers in Columbia were stopped at four times the rate of white drivers in 2017.

Tara Warne Griggs, from Race Matters, Friends, said Thursday that the police department should be most concerned with the impact of their practices. She said current police practices make people afraid to drive, which influences their behavior and results in getting a ticket and potentially arrested if they don't pay the ticket.

Burton said after the meeting that he has a "deep respect for people with differing opinion."

"I'm glad I finally found someone who sees what I see in the data," Burton said. "That there is not widespread racial profiling in the department."

"I'm not here to gloat," he added.

Deputy Police Chief Jill Schlude also presented the department's revision of their bias-free policy, which goes into effect Aug. 30. The policy reaffirms the department's commitment to training on fair and impartial policing and the importance of bias-free policing.

Department officials worked with Lorie Fridell, a University of South Florida associate professor, to revise the policy. Fridell has written a book about bias-free policing and is considered an expert on the matter. She complimented the department on being in "the minority with having a state-of-the-art policy."