

Efforts to Improve Police-Community Relations in Cincinnati

In 2002, the Cincinnati Police Department (CPD) entered into an agreement with local police and civil rights groups to collaborate to resolve social conflict, improve police-community relations, and avoid litigation. The parties developed the agreement after a 2001 U.S. Department of Justice review of CPD use of force and a brief period of civil unrest, sparked partly by several police killings of black residents in a relatively short period.

The parties asked the RAND Corporation to evaluate progress over a five-year period, starting in 2004. Researchers used myriad approaches to measure progress, including analyzing Cincinnati crime and staff deployment patterns, reviewing motorist stop data and audio and video records from motorist stops, assessing CPD staffing patterns and problem-solving approaches, and surveying citizens and police officers about their interactions.

RAND's second annual report measures progress by comparing the most recent findings to those from the first year. It focuses on the progress made on one of the agreement's key goals: "ensure fair, equitable, and courteous treatment for all" parties in police-community interactions.

A Perception of Racial Bias in Cincinnati Policing

The proportion of black and nonblack residents in Cincinnati is about equal, but black residents cluster primarily in the city's urban core. Black citizens in Cincinnati, given the neighborhoods in which they live and the generally higher rates of crime in those neighborhoods, are more likely than nonblacks to experience or observe proactive policing strategies, such as increased law enforcement presence and aggressive traffic enforcement. Thus, even if police treat blacks and nonblacks equivalently in any particular neighborhood, variations in policing practices across neighborhoods will cause most blacks to have different types of experiences with the CPD than most nonblacks have.

Abstract

Second-year findings highlight that, even though there continues to be no evidence of systematic racial bias in CPD policing activities, a large proportion of the population continues to perceive racial bias—a perception fueled by the fact that more blacks than nonblacks live in the high-crime neighborhoods where CPD engages in more proactive policing. The study highlights some areas in which these issues can be addressed and improved.

Perceptions of the CPD do indeed differ by race. Year 1 findings show that blacks are six times more likely than whites to agree that the CPD "almost always uses race to determine who to arrest" and are considerably less likely to rate the CPD as good or excellent at addressing crime.

Experiences at Traffic Stops Reinforce This Perception

Researchers analyzed 325 randomly sampled video records of traffic stops and found three key differences in how officers and drivers of different races interact in this situation. First, black drivers were more likely to experience proactive policing during the stop, including more questions about drugs or weapons and longer stops that were significantly more likely to involve searches.

Second, several of these differences were larger when the officer was white. For example, when white officers were involved in stops of black drivers, the officers were twice as likely as black officers to check passengers for identification. Moreover, white officers' stops of black drivers were more likely to be for technical reasons, such as a broken taillight, and were likely to last longer.

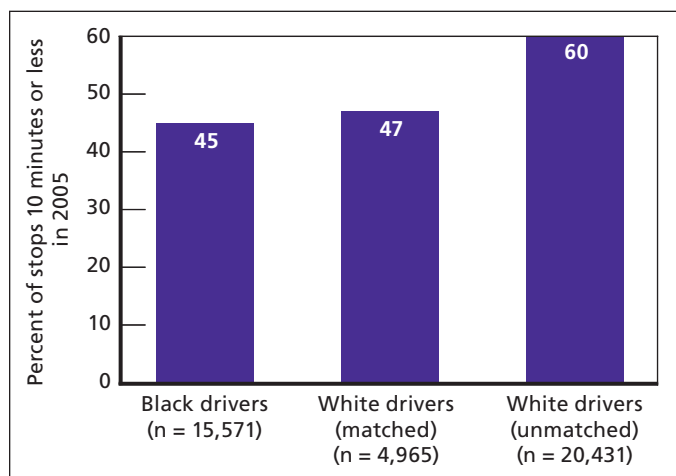
Finally, white drivers communicated more positively than black drivers during traffic stops, being more apologetic, pleasant, and courteous and less argumentative as rated by a multiracial team of analysts applying objective criteria to the videotapes. This finding is consistent with earlier findings that blacks are less pleased with the CPD, with the majority perceiving racial bias.

Differences May Result from Proactive Policing, Not Racial Bias

Although black citizens tend to experience a more intensive police presence than nonblacks do and are more likely to perceive racial bias, analysis of vehicle stop data in the second year shows, as in the first year, that there is no systematic pattern of racial bias, once stops of black and white drivers from the same neighborhoods at the same times of day and with other matched situational characteristics are compared.

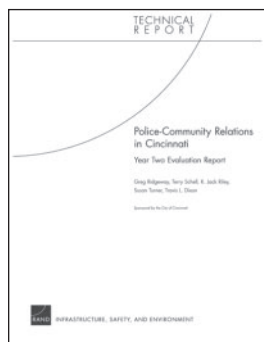
The caveat is crucial. As shown in the figure—which compares the percentage of stops that lasted less than 10 minutes for black drivers and white drivers in 2005—when situational factors are not equivalent, differences between blacks and nonblacks are very large. However, when black and white drivers are matched, the differences disappear. This suggests that some differences in black and white citizens' experiences may result from proactive policing practices in higher-crime neighborhoods, rather than from racial biases.

The researchers did find some evidence of inequality in citation rates, which were slightly lower for black drivers than for white drivers. Unfortunately, the difference is hard to interpret. Officers may give black drivers special leniency, or they may stop black drivers are stopped for infractions that are not serious enough to warrant a citation.



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Although the analysis of traffic stops did not find widespread evidence of racial bias, examining the 133 officers with the most stops did show that five officers stopped black drivers and one officer stopped white drivers at substantially higher rates than did other, similarly situated officers.

Conclusions

The second-year findings highlight that, although there is no systematic evidence of racial bias in CPD policing, a large proportion of the population still perceives it—a perception fueled by the fact that more blacks than nonblacks live in the high-crime neighborhoods where CPD engages in more proactive policing.

Three key findings emerge from the evaluation that suggest room for improvement or further study. First, CPD officers are having difficulty making a positive impression during interracial interactions, which can be addressed through training and through a review of policies for license and passenger checks to determine whether these policies are being properly implemented.

Second, a handful of officers may be using race in determining which drivers to stop. CPD is working with RAND to develop a system for quickly identifying these officers. However, whether these patterns result from racial bias or from unique characteristics of the officers' assignments is unclear and requires further study.

Finally, CPD resource allocation and crime control policies are disproportionately affecting blacks. Such policies place a greater burden on law-abiding residents living in the areas where enforcement is intensive. This burden may be partly alleviated by developing a clear sense of what the community values in crime reduction and by then tailoring interventions. For example, traffic enforcement may help in an overall effort to reduce drug sales in a neighborhood, but its contribution to drug control must be evaluated in light of the racially disparate impact that such enforcement will have and of the availability of potentially equally effective and less intrusive alternatives. ■



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