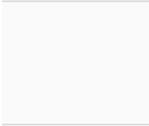


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RACIAL PROFILING SERIES Chiefs, sheriffs group takes 'dim view' of authors' analysis

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By Joshua Lynsen

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Even before it was released, Moorhead Police Chief Grant Weyland knew he was going to have problems with the state's racial profiling study.

"We expected right from the start that there would be shortcomings in the data collected and what the results would be," he said. "But it seemed like the approach to the final analysis was more like, 'Aha! We gotcha!' I'm not sure that was the way to go about this."

Three months after a report said law enforcement departments across the state practice unfair profiling, many officials still are seething.

Assembled by the Council on Crime and Justice and the Institute on Race and Poverty, the report collected data from 65 jurisdictions across the state. According to the study, that data showed officers were more likely to stop and search cars driven by minority members.

In its summary, the report said such patterns suggest a strong likelihood that racial bias plays a role in traffic-top policies and practices in Minnesota.

Law enforcement officials, however, disagree. Jim Franklin, executive director of the Minnesota Sheriff's Association, said the report has so many mistakes it cannot be trusted.

"The majority of police agencies and sheriff agencies that participated (in the study) take a rather dim view of the report," he said, "and don't agree with the report and how the data was assembled and compared, manipulated and analyzed."

Study: Profiling exists

Based on one year's worth of traffic stops, the study was particularly critical of police departments in regional hubs such as Rochester, St. Cloud and Moorhead.

The final report said that, in these three cities combined, officers stopped blacks 239 percent more often than expected and searched those vehicles 68 percent more frequently than expected. An estimated driving population was used to calculate the number of expected stops.

Authors of the study noted many factors might have contributed to that finding, but the finding itself is "indisputable."

Weyland said police chiefs and sheriffs across the state took exception to such an authoritative presentation. He said the data collected was anything but comprehensive and required additional study before any substantial findings could be made.

"I frankly thought the state's analysis was harsh," Weyland said. "I think the approach would have been better to say, 'Here's initially what it looks like, and we encourage everyone to continue to try and collect better data and draw better conclusions.'"

Chiefs: Study lacking

St. Cloud Police Chief Dennis Ballantine said the report failed to measure many influences that could dramatically alter the findings.

He said the study never questioned if officers stopped vehicles sought in connection with investigations. The study also failed to document whether the driver was from the city or not.

Ballantine said those two factors alone could significantly alter interpretation of the data. Rather than note these shortcomings, he said, the report's authors trumpeted their work as an exposé; of police bias.

"What I fault them for is the way they put the report out," Ballantine said. "They released it as banner headlines."

Bill Gillespie, executive director of the Minnesota Police and Peace Officer Association, said his organization's members have also questioned the report's validity and reliability.

Gillespie said many members perceived the report as an unsubstantiated professional affront. His association hired research firm RSM McGladrey to review the study, but that work might only serve to fire a rebuttal at the original researchers. In the meantime, Gillespie said, the larger issues go unaddressed. Because politics have trounced public interest, nobody can yet say with certainty whether law enforcement officials exhibit racial bias.

"There are a lot of people with good intentions that would like to explore this without the finger-pointing, without all the politics," he said. "If there is a problem, it needs to be resolved. We need to know the scope of the problem and whether it is a perception or a reality."

Reaction vs. action

While unified in their criticism of the racial profiling study, police chiefs have responded to it in different ways.

Some, like Ballantine, are adopting a proactive outlook. He's asked officers in St. Cloud to continue collecting data from each traffic stop they conduct. The idea, Ballantine said, is to expand the original study and see if further research produces the same conclusions.

Ballantine said he remains frustrated with the original study but additional work is needed to show whether it contains 60 pages of garbage or truth.

"I could either choose to ignore the report as being flawed, which it is, or choose to take what we can from it and grow from there," he said. "For us to get a good sense of what's going on, we chose to continue the study."

Others, like Willmar Police Chief James Kulset, have simply discounted and discarded the racial profiling study.

Kulset said the report was discussed during a city council meeting and a community meeting. After that, both he and his officers moved on.

"I'm not interested in sitting down with a pro and con discussion of the study," Kulset said. "I'm not going to get into a heated discussion or debate about whether there was an agenda by the people who wrote it. We're looking forward."

Communication is key

Still, many law enforcement officials said discussions of racial profiling should not begin and end with this statewide study.

Weyland said officers in Moorhead will continue collecting data from each traffic stop. The police chief said the issue is so important to local residents that additional work is warranted.

"You have to be responsible to the community and listen," he said. "You can't be in a state of denial and say these things don't exist in my community. This is not a simple yes-or-no issue. You have to continue the discussion and dialogue."

Franklin said the sheriffs who participated in the racial profiling study may dispute its findings but they agree with its recommendation to discuss the issue at local levels.

"What this does show is that all of us agree continued dialogue, discussion, cooperation and working together to resolve the issues need to be done irrespective of this study," he said. "Race relations will not go away with the start or end of this study."

Weyland said police officers and deputies may never overcome allegations of racial profiling but as long as police chiefs can discuss the issue with community leaders, progress is being made.

"Are we going to be able to eliminate the perception that there is profiling?" Weyland asked. "No. But I don't think that should stop us from trying to improve what we do for the community."

Staff writer Janice Gregorson contributed to this report.