

Study reveals racial disparities in South Portland arrests

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SOUTH PORTLAND — Black residents of the city are four times more likely to be arrested than white residents, according to a new analysis of arrests and traffic stops by city police.

Independent researchers also found that Black individuals accounted for 15% of all arrests of Maine residents in South Portland from 2018 through 2020, when they made up only 3.5% of the state's population, a report released Wednesday states.

But the researchers found no statistical evidence of bias-based activity by city police – instances when officers made decisions or took action based on a person's race or ethnicity rather than behavior.

“This does not mean such incidents do not happen, but rather no patterns emerge that demonstrate severe and persistent occurrences,” the report states. “However, despite limitations in the scope of this study, this analysis does provide evidence of some racial and ethnic disparities in arrests and traffic stops, particularly among Black or African American individuals.”

Those limitations include challenges in comparing police department and U.S. Census data that are measured differently.

The report recommends several next steps for the department, including further research to determine whether racial disparities resulted from factors not analyzed in the study, including police practices, patrol patterns, officer attitudes, socio-economic conditions and mental health issues.

The report mirrors similar findings of a tandem analysis conducted for neighboring Portland that was released last month. Both studies were done by the Catherine Cutler Institute at the University of Southern Maine and the Institute on Race and Justice at Northeastern University. South Portland paid \$21,015 for its portion of the study, which The Roux Institute at Northeastern partly funded, city officials said.

But while both cities are being praised for seeking independent evaluations of police actions related to race, ethnicity and other factors, the limits of the research and the need for further action stand out for Pedro Vazquez, a South Portland resident who sat on the community advisory committee that worked with the researchers.

“We’re talking about data here, but every single one of those data points is a person,” said Vazquez, who also chairs the city’s human rights commission and is a member of its civil service commission, which oversees police hiring.

“I also understand that the individuals on our police force are great people, but we’re not talking about individuals in this report,” he said. “We’re talking about systems that impact people of color disproportionately at higher rates with negative outcomes.”

The South Portland study aligns with a previous analysis the city did in 2020, in the wake of local #BlackLivesMatter protests, which found that while Black people made up 3.8% of the city’s 25,500 residents, they accounted for 16.1% of adult arrests and summonses by city police in 2019.

Police Chief Daniel Ahern welcomed the report and its recommendations as tools to help review department practices and policies, and amend them as needed to ensure his officers are fair, impartial and treat everyone with dignity and respect.

“There’s good information in there,” Ahern said. “But we don’t have a bunch of racist cops pulling people over because of the color of their skin. People of color have been treated unfairly for decades nationally and I want to make sure that’s not happening in South Portland.”

OTHER FINDINGS

The study also found:

- Black city residents accounted for 5.3 of every 100 arrests that occurred during the study period, a rate that's 4.4 times higher than the rate experienced by white people, which was 1.2 of every 100 arrests.
- The highest number of arrests occurred in the city's west end, in the Maine Mall/South Portland Gardens/Crockett's Corner neighborhoods, which accounted for 35% of the 2,831 arrests analyzed.
- Black and Latino/Hispanic people were more likely to be arrested in that same area (50%), while white people were more likely to be arrested in the waterfront neighborhoods of Ferry Village/SMCC/Knightville (30%).
- Criminal traffic violations and driving under the influence represented 42% of all arrests in the city, with no statistically significant racial or ethnic differences. White people, however, were more likely to be arrested for drug violations than Black or Latino/Hispanic people.
- Black drivers accounted for 7.6% of all traffic citations among Maine residents, while being only 3.5% of the population. However, Black drivers were stopped more often at night (16%) than during daylight hours (6%), contradicting a theory that Black drivers are stopped more often during the day in cases of racial profiling.
- Among 289 arrests of those under age 18, 35% were people of color and 27% were Black people, who account for only 9% of the state's population in that age group.
- People experiencing homelessness represented 10% of all arrests and were more likely to be white, male, age 40 to 59 and arrested multiple times. They also were more often arrested in the Thornton Heights/Cash Corner neighborhoods.

"These findings suggest that the city should continue to invest in community-based services and interventions that help people who are unhoused, in crisis, and/or grappling with mental health issues," said Sarah Goan, a researcher with the Catherine Cutler Institute who worked on the study.

The report also recommends that the department promote public engagement over police bias; upgrade data collection to improve access to use-of-force, demographic and other information; continue anti-bias training and recruitment to increase officer diversity; and step up community-based policing in neighborhoods of color.

‘THE QUESTION IS WHY?’

Tracey Horton, a professor of forensic psychology and criminal justice at Thomas College in Waterville, said it's noteworthy that the study was done voluntarily and that it spotlights racial disparities, but its impact is limited without data about arresting officers, what led to arrests and other factors that can influence outcomes.

“Disparities can occur without discrimination,” said Horton, whose work focuses on racial and ethnic disparities and discrimination in the U.S. criminal justice system. “The question is why? This is a good first run at the data. It should be the beginning of questions to be asked.”

Horton said the recommendations include good examples of anti-bias programs that have been successful in other departments. “South Portland doesn't have to reinvent the wheel,” she said.

Chief Ahern said his department already has begun sharing statistical data through social media, and a new software program will help collect demographic information to monitor for disparities. The department also recently hired its first Black officer, adding to the one Asian man and 10 women among its 39 patrol officers.

Vazquez, with the human rights commission, appreciates what the city has done to address racial disparities, but he expects more. He said the commission will review the report at its next meeting and recommend specific actions to the City Council.

“This report isn't the end of this,” he said. “I feel confident knowing the leadership of the city isn't running away from this problem.”

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