

# Study finds racial disparity in Portland arrests, but no pattern of racial profiling

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By Matt Byrne

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An independent study examining arrests and traffic stops found that Portland police pull over and arrest Black people at disproportionate rates, especially if the interaction was initiated by a police officer as opposed to a complaint or 911 call.

The findings, however, do not address what caused the disparity, and researchers found no evidence that police in Portland were engaging in a pattern of racial profiling. They called for further study.

The research shows that about 17% of the more than 7,500 arrests between 2018 and 2020 were of Black people, who accounted for only 5% of the city's population. Black residents were three times as likely to be arrested by police as white residents, and 17% more likely to be arrested when an officer initiated contact.

The study was ordered by former Police Chief Frank Clark amid the local and nationwide racial justice demonstrations in 2020 that followed the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. The former police chief in South Portland, Timothy Sheehan, signed on as well. Only Portland's results were released last week.



Hundreds of protesters marched to the Portland police station and laid down on the ground on June 1, 2020, during the fourth straight day of demonstrations against institutional racism and violence by police spurred by the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. *Staff photo by Derek Davis*

Clark's initiative was unusual, said George Shaler, a senior research associate at the Catherine E. Cutler Institute for Health and Policy at the University of Southern Maine, which helped conduct the study.

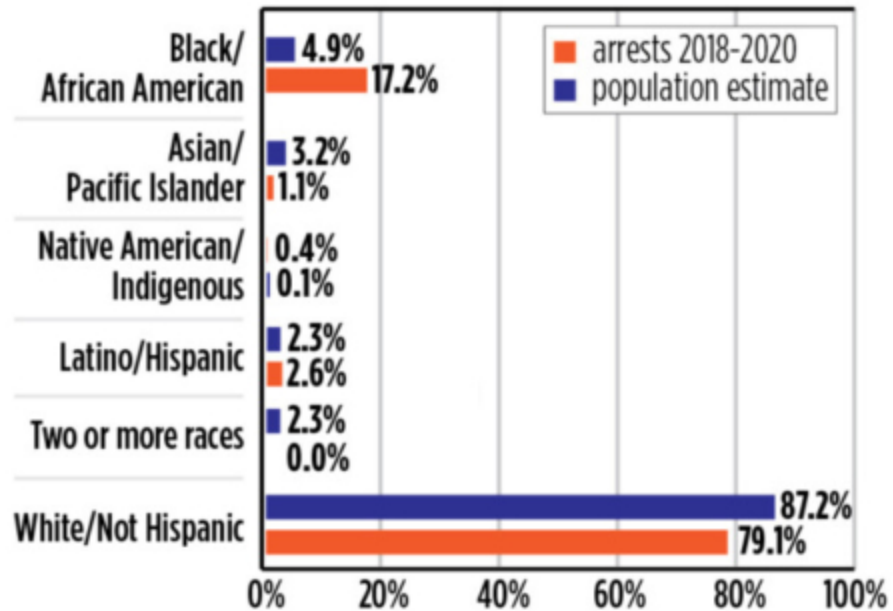
"I need to give the police departments some props, if you will, for requesting this study," Shaler said. "A lot of police departments don't do these studies willingly. And that wasn't the case with the Portland and South Portland police departments. They said, 'we need to look at this,' given the circumstances in 2020."

Shaler and his co-authors recommended a deeper examination of officer-initiated arrests – those conducted without a pre-existing warrant – to try to determine what may be causing officers to charge Black people more frequently. They also suggested a community-based public safety initiative, where people other than police are empowered to address low-level issues before police become involved.

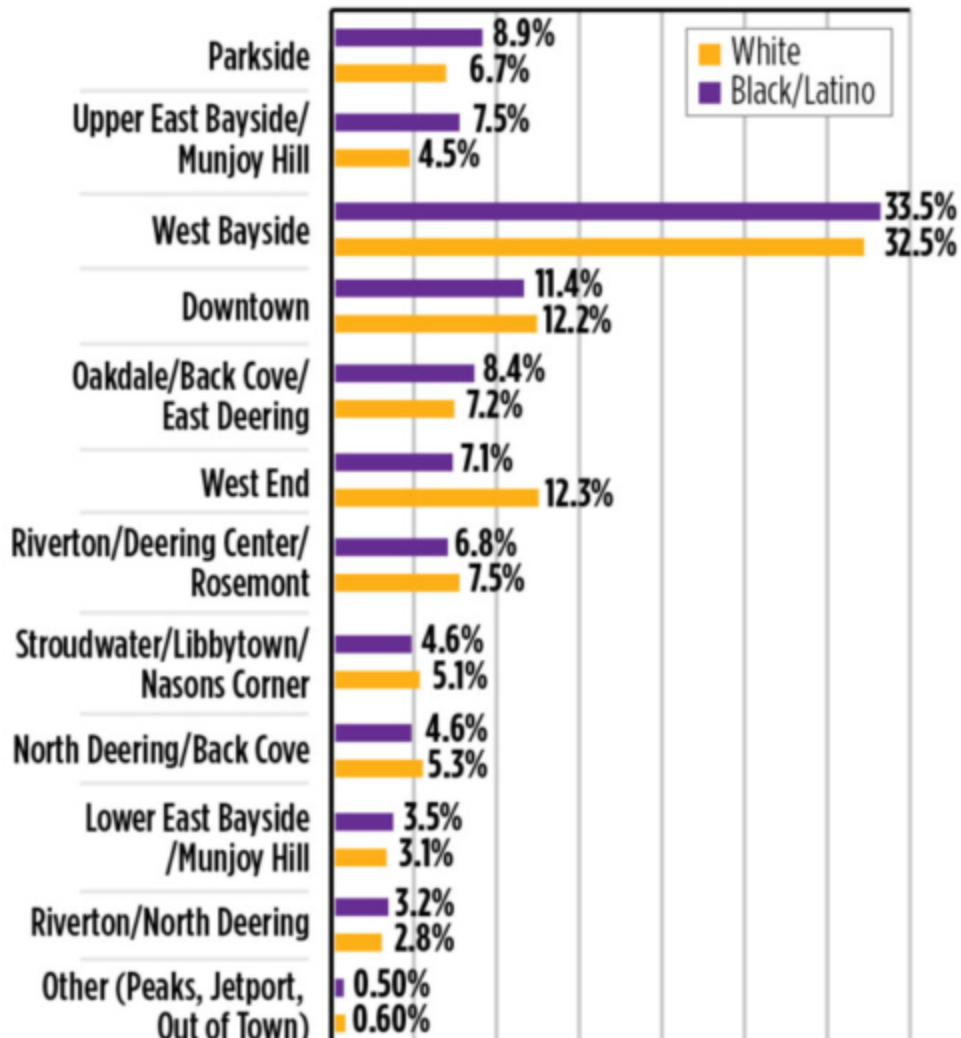
## **POLICING LEVELS IN WEST BAYSIDE**

Black drivers, who account for only 4% of the driving-age population in Portland, were pulled over for 14% of all traffic stops citywide, but received citations at a lower rate than white drivers, the study found.

# Portland PD arrests by race vs. statewide demographics



## Portland arrest locations





SOURCE: Portland Police Department

STAFF GRAPHIC | JAKE LAWS

In the West Bayside neighborhood, where the majority of traffic stops occurred, the odds of a pulled-over driver being Black increased by 38%.

Black drivers were cited in 25% of stops, while white drivers in the same neighborhood were cited about 15% of the time.

Homeless people were also disproportionately the subjects of police action. More than one-third of all arrests during the study period, 36%, involved homeless individuals, and more than half of the arrests involving homeless people – 52% – occurred in the West Bayside neighborhood.

The rate and frequency of homeless people being arrested surprised Shaler.

“We knew we’d see large numbers but we didn’t think it’d be quite that large,” he said. “It wasn’t a one-year thing, it happened throughout the study period.”

“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 one study author, Sarah Goan, of USM’s Catherine Cutler Institute.

## **FURTHER STUDIES NEEDED**

Answering deeper questions about what caused the racial disparities would require more work, the researchers found, but the authors highlighted the historic legacy of discrimination as a framework for understanding the figures: BIPOC people are over-represented in the criminal-legal system across America, experience higher rates of poverty, face more discipline in school and disconnection from education, have poorer health outcomes and are more likely to experience homelessness or housing insecurity.

“It is important to firmly place our local inquiry against the backdrop of national trends and to acknowledge the systematic factors which contribute to myriad disparities experienced by historically marginalized communities nationwide, even if many of them are outside the scope of this targeted examination,” the study authors wrote. “Structural racism and discrimination in America are widespread and deeply rooted in our criminal legal systems, public health systems, education systems and economic opportunities,” they wrote.

The study group recommended police improve their data collection practices. Extracting and analyzing the limited information evaluated in the study was difficult and complex. In many cases, information was not available, inconsistent or contained errors. They urged police to capture data on all police interactions with the public, regardless of the outcome.

The department should also initiate a high-level review of officer-initiated arrests, specifically in cases of public drinking, drug use and disorderly conduct to look for officers whose discretionary arrests are outliers, the authors wrote.

The authors urged ongoing anti-bias training for all officers and staff, and continued efforts to diversify the patrol ranks; only 3% of officers – 5 individuals – are not white.

While the study authors recognized efforts to expand the behavioral health unit, they urged the city to explore crisis intervention programs that are not led by police. The most dramatic suggestion was to pilot a community-led public safety model that would empower community members to respond to low-level public safety incidents.

“In Portland, a partnership between the current community policing centers and a new community-based, citizen-led program could help to ameliorate the observed racial disparities while also maintaining a partnership for larger issues,” they wrote, suggesting the program start in Bayside, Parkside and the Munjoy Hill area west of Congress Street.

Shaler said Portland police have embraced the findings and are examining how to dig deeper into officer-led arrests, but he acknowledged that the limited nature of the study means more work will have to be done.

“While the study did not find statistical evidence of biased-based policing by members of the Portland Police Department, we are committed to using this data to drive quality improvement efforts,” said F. Heath Gorham, interim police chief, in a statement.

Gorham said the agency has expanded its behavioral health unit with four more social workers who will provide an alternative response to some emergency calls to help divert people with mental health problems and substance use disorder.

“The Department sought this study to learn how it could build and improve upon its policing practices, and we will continue to do that going forward,” Gorham said.

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