



Urbana Police Department Memorandum

TO: Mayor Marlin and Urbana City Council
FROM: Chief Bryant Seraphin
RE: Traffic Stop Plan for 2021
DATE: November 11, 2020

INTRODUCTION

On July 18, 2003, Senate Bill 30 was signed into law and established a four-year statewide study. The study focused on data from traffic stops, specifically perceived race data, for the purpose of attempting to identify racial bias. The study began on January 1, 2004, and was initially set to expire on December 31, 2007. There have been several legislated extensions, and recently Public Act 101-0024 eliminated the study's scheduled end date.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

One of the primary purposes for traffic enforcement is the prevention and the reduction of traffic crashes, injuries, and death. In 2015, nationwide 35,092 people were killed as a result of traffic crashes. In comparison, 15,696 were victims of homicide in the United States. A review of line of duty deaths from 2015 to 2019 showed that automobile accidents approximated the same number of deaths as gunfire of law enforcement officers in the United States.

In 2018, the Urbana Police Department responded to 1,075 traffic crash calls for service. During that same year, crashes represented 4.12% of total calls for service volume and was the seventh most frequent of all call types. When eliminating calls for service that were likely officer initiated activities, crashes rose to the fourth most common call for service.

URBANA POLICE DEPARTMENT TRAFFIC STOP DATA

Since 2003, the Urbana Police Department has engaged in the collection and analysis of data related to the traffic stop study. As a result of the analysis, a disparity in the ratios of traffic stops with minority drivers, specifically Black drivers, was identified. The Urbana Police Department has recognized this disparity and has employed changes to further understand

and attempt to reduce the disparity. While there has been a reduction in the disparity ratio, disparity in traffic stops still exists.

At a time when community engagement and collaboration is even more critical to public safety, the Urbana Police Department engaged in an internal conversation about the disparity ratio. We asked ourselves some questions. What further tactics can we employ to decrease disparity ratios of minority drivers? How can we impact traffic safety overall? Will any new efforts we try lead to an unintended increase in crime?

NEW TRAFFIC ENFORCEMENT CONCEPT

These discussions led us to looking at our data related to traffic stops with a different lens. The focus in the past had been on individual officer behavior. Instead, it became clear that it was our system of making stops that was racially biased, not our individual officers. Inspection of the data led us to collectively determine that disparity does not exist at the level of individual stops – minority drivers are equally likely to receive warnings and citations as White drivers. Further, when controlling for visibility, the same proportion of Black drivers are stopped in daylight and in darkness. The primary cause of the disparity ratio is the location of stops; the stops conducted on patrol are concentrated in areas with high levels of calls for service. Some of those areas are heavily populated with Black citizens. And finally, when we compared the areas of high calls for service against the location of traffic accidents, we found they were not congruent.

Moreover, the Urbana Police Department knew the disparity ratio disappeared when officers made stops while working the Selective Traffic Enforcement Program (STEP) details. STEP designates where and when officers will enforce traffic laws. STEP locations are determined through accident data. To the contrary, traffic enforcement during routine patrol duties is largely not systematic or focused. Traffic enforcement in this context is up to individual officers assigned to patrol responsibilities and will generally occur where the officers are physically located. An important differentiation between the two models is that traffic enforcement through normal patrol duties is unfocused and generates a disparity ratio. Traffic enforcement via the STEP model is a focused enforcement model and historical data shows that when STEP enforcement focuses on location, the disparity ratio on traffic stops disappears.

With that important distinction in mind, we concluded that focusing traffic enforcement efforts where higher volumes of traffic accidents occur will be the general rule. The Urbana Police Department will direct officers to conduct traffic enforcement in designated areas that are predetermined through the analysis of traffic accident data. Essentially, the department will be using the Selective Traffic Enforcement Program (STEP) model for all traffic stops as a pilot program for 2021.

However, dangerous driving behaviors that represent a significant life-safety issue to the general public will continue to be addressed in all parts of the city. In addition, officers will still be able to make Terry Stops to investigate crimes. But, routine traffic efforts during normal patrol duties will be made in identified zones, just like STEP. In doing so, we believe the disparity ratio in traffic stops will decrease.

While researching this idea, the Urbana Police Department learned that the Fayetteville, North Carolina, Police Department embarked on a similar plan. By prioritizing traffic stops based on safety, they observed a reduction in their disparity ratio. According to a study published in January 2020 in *Injury Epidemiology*, “The re-prioritization of traffic stop types by law enforcement agencies may have positive public health consequences both for motor vehicle injury and racial disparity outcomes while having little impact on non-traffic crime.”

CONCLUSION

The Urbana Police Department is concerned about traffic enforcement and the overall reduction of accidents in the city. The department is also keenly aware of the need to reduce the traffic stop disparity ratio. As a result, the department will engage in designating traffic enforcement zones based on accident data. In these areas, officers may engage in enforcement of any traffic violation with the focus on dangerous driver behavior and those that represent a safety issue for the general public, such as: seatbelt usage, cellphone usage, speeding, improper lane usage, following too closely, disregarding traffic lights and signs, etc.

In areas other than the designated traffic enforcement zones, officers may make stops for driving behavior that poses a significant public safety risk. Officers will still be permitted to make stops for the investigation of criminal laws.