

# Report: Iowa City police sees positive trends in traffic stops

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## The Gazette

Report tracks citations, arrests, searches by race



A sticker advertising the Crime Stoppers program adorns the back of an Iowa City Police Department patrol car Friday, Aug. 16, 2013 in Iowa City. (The Gazette)

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IOWA CITY — Iowa City police are as likely to cite whites as minorities following traffic stops, according to a new report presented to the Iowa City Council.

“That’s been pretty stable the last couple of years,” said Chris Barnum, director of the master’s degree program in criminal justice at St. Ambrose University in Davenport and a specialist in racial disparity in police traffic stops.

“There’s no difference in terms of who gets a ticket.”

Barnum has worked with Iowa City to study traffic stop data going back to 2007 in order to track disproportionality in traffic stops, as well as outcomes such as citations, arrests, searches and seizures.

Barnum made his presentation on the 2018 data during the council’s work session Tuesday night.

Barnum's data for 2018 was based on 54,218 observations in the city, compared with data from 12,349 traffic stops last year.

Barnum and his team divide the city into one-mile squares and — using observations and census data — make a determination on the expected number of traffic stops involving minorities in those squares. That is then compared with actual traffic stops.

Most of the traffic stops occur in the downtown area and surrounding neighborhoods, as well as the Broadway Street and Cross Park Avenue area and surrounding neighborhoods, according to the data. Citywide, minority traffic stops were about 7 percent higher than what should be expected, Barnum reported.

“The information suggests that levels of disproportionality tended to be lowest in areas where the most stops were made and highest in the areas where the fewest stops were made,” states his report to council.

While disproportionality can be an indicator of bias or discrimination by officers, that is not necessarily the case, Barnum said.

“It is possible for disproportionality to occur for a number of legitimate reasons,” such as driving behavior, vehicle condition and driver's license status, the report states.

Once a traffic stop has been made, Barnum's study found minorities and non-minorities are cited at an equal rate.

Minorities were arrested in 2018 almost twice as often following traffic stops, the data shows.

However, Barnum told the council that officers in only 74 out of 712 such arrests had the discretion as to whether to make an arrest or not. An officer has no choice but to arrest someone, for example, when they're wanted on a warrant or for drunken driving.

In cases where an officer did have discretion, minorities were only arrested at a slightly higher rate than whites, Barnum found.

“This is an important finding which suggests officers' arrest patterns are less disparate against minority drivers in conditions where they have a great deal of choice or discretion,” the report states.

Barnum said researchers started tracking probable-cause searches in 2018 and found that such searches occurred nearly two-and-a-half times as often with minority drivers. However, they found officers were more likely to find contraband or evidence when searching white drivers.

Iowa City police Chief Jody Matherly told the council the information on probable-cause searches was new information to “sink into” and address.

“This is just another piece of the puzzle to get things corrected,” Matherly said.

Overall, Matherly said he was encouraged by the trends in Barnum’s report. He said the department reviews traffic stop data on a monthly basis to ensure officers are patrolling their entire zone and not just one area, as well as addressing safety and quality-of-life issues over minor infractions.

“I fully expect this to be a gradual change,” he said. “I’m glad to see them trend down. As a group, we’re improving.”

City Council members also expressed their approval with the report.

“I’m just pleased to see the continued improvement,” Susan Mims said.