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Travis County District Attorney Candidate Challenges City Officials' Claims of Racial Bias by Police

Martin Harry, Republican candidate for Travis County District Attorney, challenges the conclusions and recommendations of the City of Austin based on recently released findings of traffic stop data. Data show that the race and ethnicity of drivers of vehicles stopped by Austin police is disproportionate to the race and ethnicity of Austin's population generally.

Most significantly, vehicles stopped by police disproportionately have black drivers. According to the report, blacks aged 18 and over make up approximately 8.0 percent of Austin's population but account for 15 percent of drivers stopped by police. The data also show, however, that 95 percent of traffic stops are made *without* the race or ethnicity of the driver being known. Even in those stops, blacks are still stopped disproportionately, about 6.0 percent more than their share of the population. Thus, the data show that the racial disparity in these stops is not attributable to racial bias on the part of police officers making traffic stops.

Of the five percent of traffic stops where race/ethnicity is known, blacks are overrepresented by 9.5 percent. Asians are significantly underrepresented by almost 6.0 percent while white and Hispanic drivers are slightly underrepresented too.

The City's analysis provides no explanation for disparities. There is no data on the reasons for stops, the race/ethnicity of the officer making them or other factors. Nevertheless, City officials characterize the disparities as a problem that needs to be corrected. The authors of the report assert that proportional racial disparity in motor vehicle stops, arrests, searches, field observations, warnings, and citations should be *zero* to gain community trust.

Contrary to findings, the authors explicitly attribute disparities to racial bias. They recommend that the City "[a]cknowledge that race plays a major role in who we stop, search, and for whom we use discretion favorably." It is recommended that implicit bias testing be included in the Austin Police Department hiring process and that current employees receive implicit bias testing.

In a news release by the City, Chief Equity Officer Brion Oaks is quoted as stating, "This report opens the door for us to have the real critical and courageous conversation about how racism plays out in policing and the fair administration of justice in our city. Our vision is to make Austin the most livable city in the nation and we can't accomplish that vision if the color of one's skin continues to be a predictor of if you get stopped, searched, or arrested in our city."

Harry states, “Until we know the reasons for disparities, it seems premature and wrong to claim that they are a problem that needs to be corrected. According to Harry, “the data actually refutes claims of racial bias by police” and “the false portrayal of the traffic stop data misleads the public and maligns the Austin Police Department.” Harry believes City officials have attributed racial disparities to racial animus without a factual basis, stating, “It is outrageous that those who compiled and analyzed the data would make such unfounded claims. It is evidence of institutional opposition to law enforcement in city government.”

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