Analysis of arrest and traffic citation data released by South Portland

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A South Portland Police Vehicle. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

The cities of South Portland and Portland commissioned an analysis of the department's arrest and traffic citation data in 2021 to better understand whether racial and ethnic disparities are part of the decision to arrest and to issue traffic citations to individuals.

"Like the city of Portland, the South Portland Police Department wanted to learn more about how we can build and enhance our practices," said Police Chief Daniel Ahern. "We intend to use these data to focus in on areas for improvement."

The Catherine Cutler Institute at the University of Southern Maine and the Institute on Race and Justice at Northeastern University were hired for the study. The analysis was partly funded by The Roux Institute of Northeastern University.

"It is unusual for a department to request this type of study," said Jack McDevitt, professor of the practice in criminology and criminal justice, and director of the Institute on Race and Justice at Northeastern University, one of the co-authors of the report. "Usually, law enforcement agencies conduct these types of studies when they are legislatively required to do so or facing some type of litigation."

At South Portland Police Department, disparities in arrests were identified, but without any evidence of severity or regularity in biased police actions, according to the city.

Data from 2018-2020 was examined. The study found that 15 percent of all arrests among Maine residents in South Portland were of Black or African individuals, a demographic that makes up only an estimated 3.5 percent of the population. The study found no evidence of racial or ethnic bias being involved in the decision to request multiple charges, which is an indicator of biased decisions, according to other research.

According to the report, more than 10 percent of all South Portland's arrests were homeless and likely to be white, male, and between the ages of 40 and 59. These individuals were also more likely to be arrested multiple times during the length of the study period. Individuals were not arrested for being homeless but for criminal activity.

"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 of the University of Southern Maine's Catherine Cutler Institute.

The city has made strides toward these goals. South Portland has grown its general assistance budget and staffing to assist with heightened need for housing and food assistance. Resources are provided through two behavioral health liaisons in the police department. The city is working with Milestone Recovery's HOME team to increase resources for individuals with homelessness and substance use.

"South Portland Police Department is invested in continuously looking at the data and adjusting our practices to improve the quality of service we provide," said Ahern. "When responding to our unhoused population, our efforts are focused on providing resources without involving the criminal justice system.

"We don't arrest people for being homeless or committing minor offenses often associated with homelessness. We do, however, arrest people who are homeless who commit serious crimes like assaults, breaking and entering, and having outstanding warrants. This study has highlighted that there's still room for improvement, and we're eager to work with the city and our community on next steps."

For more information on the report, a link can be found at www.southportland.org.