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EDITOR'S PICK

Our View: Justice: Change traffic stops to reduce racial targeting

Jun 9, 2023



Why it matters: A new study shows that a policy focusing on serious traffic violations reduced unfair targeting of Black drivers.



Police departments across Minnesota should learn from changes made by some metropolitan police departments to their policies on traffic stops, which reduced unfair racial targeting and bettered public safety.

Justice Innovation Lab analyzed 200,000 traffic stops by police departments in St. Paul, Maplewood, St. Anthony and Roseville, which deemphasized stops for equipment violations and prioritized stops for moving violations. The change produced a number of positive results, according to a report in the Star Tribune.

Prior to the change in policy, Blacks were stopped for equipment violations at four times the rate of whites. After the policy was changed to focus on more serious violations, Black were stopped only about 2.5 times as often as whites. That figure is still disproportionate given Blacks make up only about 8% of the population, but is a vast improvement.

Blacks were searched during traffic stops nine times more than whites with the previous policy. That was reduced to four times more than whites after the change in policy.

The study shows equipment violations for Blacks were 55 per 1,000 residents before the policy change and declined to 19 per thousand residents with the change in police stop policies.

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The focus on more serious moving violations in St. Paul showed that those violations

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increased from 70% of stops to 88% of stops. That means police likely prevented more accidents and deaths by increasing their stops for things like driving while intoxicated and speeding.

Ramsey County Attorney John Choi said the research shows the new strategy not only reduced the “unequal treatment” of some community members, but also allowed law enforcement to focus scarce resources to more serious issues and thus improving overall public safety.

The new strategy also helps build good community relations. When people of color don’t feel targeted, they’re likely to see police as a partner in public safety for themselves and their families.

Experts say the change in policy and clear positive results could make it a model for other departments. The cooperation between the county attorney, police departments and community groups was unique, said Akhi Johnson, director at the Vera Institute for Justice, a group that works to end mass incarceration.

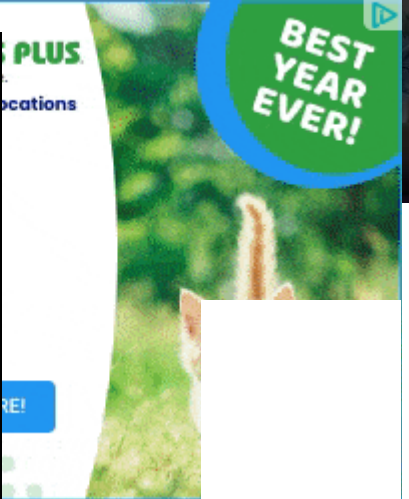
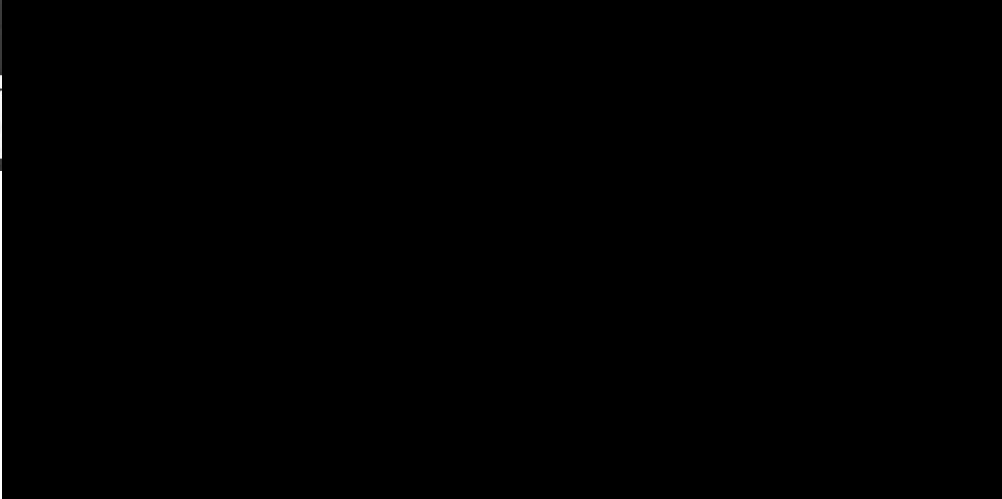
We encourage Mankato area police and sheriff’s departments to consider this simple change in emphasis on traffic stops. It’s better policing. It’s better public safety and it makes everyone feel safe no matter their skin color.

Why it matters:

A new study shows that a policy focusing on serious traffic violations reduced unfair targeting of Black drivers.

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