

Roanoke Police Department
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Roanoke Police Department



Annual Review of Biased Based Policing

Annual Review for Calendar Year 2021

Chief Samuel B. Roman

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Abstract

During calendar year 2021, the Roanoke Police Department (Department) responded to 86,849 citizen-initiated calls for service and conducted 7,646 traffic stops. There were 94,834 official police-public contacts. The rate of citizen complaints was 0.02% of police-public contacts (or 99.98% of these contacts were without citizen complaints). Both calls for service and traffic stops remained the same in 2021 as compared to the pandemic year 2020. The Department received one citizen complaint about bias based policing.

The complainant made several allegations that the officers had abused their authority, one of which that their actions were based on racial profiling. The complainant alleged the officers profiled him because they said they were looking for a black male with a gun. Review of the body worn cameras showed that the officers never mentioned race in their interaction with the citizen. The Professional Standards Unit exonerated the officers after review.

This analysis included a review of Operational Directive 2.4.2, Prohibition of Discriminatory Conduct and Bias Based Profiling and Department supporting policies, practices and procedures. This analysis did not identify nor indicate a need to revise Operational Directive 2.4.2 or any supporting policies, practices or procedures.

Introduction

The Roanoke Police Department has long been invested in a culture of community-oriented policing, with the formal history of this going back almost thirty years. With the appointment of Chief Sam Roman, the last three (and now four) Chiefs have affirmed the importance of this commitment by both word and deed.

A major barrier against bias in policing is through the cultural adoption of community policing, not just as a practice but also as a philosophy of policing. The Roanoke Police Department has a history of community policing that spans across the previous thirty years. Introduced to the department under the administration of Chief Joe Gaskins, continued under the administrations of Chief Chris Perkins and Chief Tim Jones, it is now advanced by Chief Sam Roman. The Roanoke Police Department's commitment to community policing can be illustrated by many endeavors.

First, in 2014, the Department formed the Community Response Bureau (CRB). The CRB was developed to provide a flexible, rapid response to problems that crop up in any neighborhood or community citywide. These officers can provide a variety of police services tailored to the problem at hand and the community where those problems manifest. The most visible face of the CRB to the citizens is the four Community Resource Officers (CROs). There is one officer assigned to each geographic policing zone (the geozones are also part of the Department's commitment to community policing). These officers attend most, if not all, the various community group meetings in the respective geozones where they serve as direct liaison for the Department and the neighborhood. CROs frequently organize special events targeted at crime reduction and crime prevention. These events range from informal community walks to National Night Out events.

Community Resource Officers are also responsible for highly localized problems at such places as an apartment complex or even a single address. The CRO will typically open a SARA project and initially hold a meeting with the various stakeholders to determine the nature and extent of the problem. Once the scanning and analysis is completed, a response is generated during which the CRO may bring a variety of city resources to bear. It is not unusual to enlist personnel from the Department, from Code Enforcement, from Solid Waste Management, to Transportation to ameliorate the problem. Once the response has been completed, the CRO monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of that solution. The CROs most clearly serve as frontline ambassadors for the Department.

The Patrol bureau is also actively involved in community policing. At an everyday level, officers strive to spend as much time as workloads permit engaged in foot patrol in designated crime hot spot areas around the city. While on foot patrol, these officers engage with neighborhood residents to learn about their concerns and also spend some time simply socializing. The foot patrols are augmented by bicycle patrols both in the hot spots areas and also in other neighborhoods around the city. Bike officers seem to naturally attract citizens when they stop and chat which furthers the Department's community engagement efforts.

Patrol, CRT, and detectives from the Criminal Investigation Unit (CIU) all participate in a number of community activities organized by the Department Crime Prevention Specialist/Community Outreach officer. These include programs such as RPD Reads, RPD Homework Helpers, Art with a Cop, Summer Lunch Outreach, Lea Youth Outdoor Basketball league, and crime prevention presentations.

For the last six years, Roanoke Police Department officers have specifically trained on the four procedural justice principles of fairness, impartiality, giving voice, and transparency. Through this training, it is stressed that a citizen’s evaluation of a police-public encounter is not just based on the outcome of that encounter but also on the process used by the officer(s) to arrive at that outcome. One of the single best ways to eliminate racial or ethnic bias in policing is to insure that the process of police-public encounters is conducted following the principles of procedural justice.

The following table shows the demographic breakdown for the four quadrants in the city and is based on the current U.S. Census estimates

Area	Total Population	Black	Black Percent	White	White Percent	All Other	All Other Percent
Southeast	21,149	2,145	10.14%	17,112	80.91%	1,892	8.95%
Northeast	23,690	3,805	16.06%	15,800	66.69%	4,085	17.24%
Southwest	26,536	3,703	13.95%	20,120	75.82%	2,713	10.22%
Northwest	28,112	19,080	67.87%	6,437	22.90%	2,595	9.23%
Total	99,487	28,733	28.88%	59,469	59.78%	11,285	11.34%

There have been some demographic shifts in the city with a significant increase in the All Other category. The largest contingent in this category are citizens of Hispanic ethnicity regardless of race. There was slight decrease in White citizens and slight increase in Black citizens in the city. Neither change was statistically significant.

In Southeast, the White population increased slightly and the Black population decreased slightly. In Northeast, both the Black and White population decreased but the All Other proportion increased significantly. This suggests a trend for Hispanic citizens to find homes in the Northeast quadrant. In Southwest, both the Black and White population increased slightly, whereas the All Other population decreased significantly. In Northwest, the Black population remained unchanged while the White population decreased. The All Other population increased in Northwest significantly.

In effect, these changes sharpen the lines of segregation in the city with the northern quadrants having increases in Black, Indigenous, and People of Color and the southern quadrants showing increases in the White population. The city had a significant loss in White citizens according to these US Census estimates.

Analysis

The data for this analysis were drawn from the Records Management System (RMS) for the calendar year 2021. Specifically, the data represent traffic stops where an enforcement action was taken and all arrests for 2021.

To make the determination if there is disproportionate contact with minority citizens, a disproportionality index (DI) is computed for citations and arrests based on the Zone and Patrol District where the contact occurred. A DI is computed by comparing the proportion of the contacts which occurred (by race/ethnicity) to an appropriate benchmark. A benchmark is an estimate of the proportion of the population that would be expected to be encountered when there is no bias present. The formula is as follows

$$DI = \frac{\textit{Proportion actually encountered}}{\textit{Proportion expected to encounter when no bias}}$$

When the DI=1, then the proportion encountered is exactly what would be expected when no bias is present. Disproportionality Index values less than one indicate less frequent contact than expected and values greater than one indicate more frequent contact than expected. For example, a DI=0.95 would indicate that the event occurred 5% less often than expected and a DI=1.05 would indicate it occurred 5% more often than expected.

The most appropriate benchmark for traffic citations would be all bad drivers on the roads. In this case, an estimate of bad drivers is determined by taking the number of motor vehicle crashes where the driver was cited for being "at fault." This has an advantage in that it is not a department-initiated enforcement activity. Who gets into a motor vehicle crash is not under department control. By assessing the racial/ethnic breakdown of cited drivers in a motor vehicle crash, a benchmark estimate is generated.

The benchmark for arrests would be the actual number of offenders broken down by race/ethnicity. Since this is inherently an unknown, the best estimate for a benchmark is nondiscretionary arrests. Nondiscretionary arrests are those wherein the officer is required to affect an arrest such as serious domestic violence or felony offenses. In the case of nondiscretionary arrests, neither race nor ethnicity is a factor. By comparing discretionary arrests to nondiscretionary arrests, a DI can be calculated to determine if there is bias in discretionary arrests.

Traffic Citations

The following table presents the Disproportionality Index for each geographic policing zone and patrol district, as well as the citywide tabulation. (Tables for the percent of crash citations and percent of traffic citations are available on request).

2021 Traffic Citation Disproportionality Index (DI)					
Zone by DI	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Unknown	White
Zone 1		0.37		0.90	0.52
DOWNTOWN DISTRICT		0.25			0.21
DISTRICT 3		0.69			1.18
DISTRICT 7		0.22		0.25	0.25
DISTRICT 13		1.06		0.74	1.03
Zone 2	0.65	0.63		0.67	0.64
DISTRICT 6		1.11		1.78	1.00
DISTRICT 12	0.16	0.33		0.36	0.41
DISTRICT 14		1.10		0.61	0.92
Zone 3	0.25	0.72		0.33	0.55
DISTRICT 1		0.38		0.25	0.31
DISTRICT 5		0.91		0.18	1.24
DISTRICT 9		0.39		0.18	0.31
DISTRICT 11					10.54
Zone 4	0.49	0.53		0.59	0.78
DISTRICT 2		0.55		0.74	0.70
DISTRICT 4		2.35			12.50
DISTRICT 8		0.32		0.25	0.29
DISTRICT 10		0.65		1.47	1.02
Grand Total	1.37	0.91	0.49	0.88	1.07

The Disproportionality Index (DI) indicates that Black drivers were 9% less than would be expected and that White drivers were cited 7% more often than would be expected using the “at fault” benchmark. Although numerically a very small group, Asian drivers were cited 37% more than would be expected. Very few Hispanic drivers were cited at all.

Arrests

The following table shows the Disproportionality Index (DI) for discretionary arrests compared to non-discretionary arrests. In a non-discretionary arrest, due to the seriousness of the crime, the offender is arrested without consideration for race or ethnicity. Discretionary arrests are those arrests wherein the officer has some degree of discretion as whether or not to arrest the subject. Examples of discretionary arrests would be offenses such as Disorderly Conduct, Trespass, or Public Intoxication.

Arrest Disproportionality	Black	White
Zone 1	1.00	1.63
DOWNTOWN DISTRICT	4.00	18.98
DISTRICT 3	0.52	2.04
DISTRICT 7	0.89	1.33
DISTRICT 13	0.70	0.99
Zone 2	1.12	1.97
DISTRICT 6	0.42	0.97
DISTRICT 12	1.04	2.09
DISTRICT 14	3.84	4.77
Zone 3	0.56	1.35
DISTRICT 1	0.45	1.42
DISTRICT 5	1.00	0.82
DISTRICT 9	0.58	1.53
DISTRICT 11	0.73	1.68
Zone 4	0.56	1.15
DISTRICT 2	0.52	1.27
DISTRICT 4	0.51	0.87
DISTRICT 8	0.70	0.75
DISTRICT 10	0.51	1.75
Not Recorded	0.52	1.34
Grand Total	0.66	1.51

Black citizens were subjected to discretionary arrest 34% less often than expected and White citizens were arrested 51% more often

In each of the four police Zones, White citizens were subjected to discretionary arrest at a higher rate than Black citizens were. In Zones 2 Blacks and whites were arrested at higher rates than would be expected. Zone 1 has the highest rate, citywide, of quality of life offenses for which the decision to arrest is discretionary. Zone 2 has the largest retail shopping areas in the city where the predominant crime is shoplifting, also a discretionary arrest. These two factors combined are the most likely explanation for the higher discretionary arrest rates in those Zones.

Summary

Overall, given the number of police-public contacts (94,834) the rate of citizen complaints at 0.02% is extraordinarily low. Only one of those complaints was alleged to have been due to racial bias and the officers were exonerated on review of the body worn cameras. Of the four sustained citizen complaints, none were on the basis of racial bias.

With respect to traffic citations, the available evidence showed a Disproportionality Index for Black drivers of 0.91. This indicates that Black drivers were cited 9% less often than would be expected. This directly contradicts a study of traffic stop data completed by the Race and Social Policy Research Center at Virginia Tech. The problem with the Virginia Tech study is that it uses total population as a benchmark. This is a first-generation benchmark used frequently in similar studies of thirty years ago. The Roanoke Police Department uses a third-generation benchmark, at-fault drivers in a traffic crash. This a better representation of the number of bad drivers on the road compared to population demographics. White drivers were cited 7% more than expected.

With respect to arrests, the best benchmark is arrests that are non-discretionary. These are serious felony and domestic violence offenses that require, by law, that the offender be arrested. For the year 2021, Black citizens were subjected to discretionary arrests at a far lower rate than would be expected. Correspondingly, White citizens were arrested at a higher rate than would be expected.

There is no indication in the available data that there is systematic bias present in the policing operations of the Roanoke Police Department.