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Comptroller reports on Tennessee Highway Patrol vehicle stops

NASHVILLE, TENN. – Are minorities more or less likely to be stopped by the Tennessee Highway Patrol? Once stopped, is there any variation in warnings given, citations, searches, or arrests?

A new report by the Comptroller's Office of Research, *Tennessee Highway Patrol Vehicle Stops During 2006: A Summary*, explores these questions.

State lawmakers asked the Comptroller's Office of Research to analyze stops by troopers during 2006 to determine whether race and ethnicity appear to play a role in troopers' decisions to stop motorists.

Troopers collected information on every vehicle stop, including race, ethnicity, gender, age, traffic violation, result of the stop, and whether troopers conducted a search.

The U.S. Department of Justice defines racial profiling as: "any police-initiated action that relies on the race, ethnicity, or national origin rather than the behavior of an individual..." Although police may not use racial or ethnic stereotypes to select persons stopped, they may use race or ethnicity to determine whether a person matches a specific description of a particular suspect.

Overall, the Comptroller's report found that vehicle stops of white, African American, and drivers categorized as "other" appeared racially proportionate to Tennessee's valid drivers. Hispanic drivers, however, appeared to be overrepresented. Additionally, analysis of post-stop activities such as search, disposition, and physical evidence seizure showed some variation by race and ethnicity; Hispanic drivers were overrepresented in many post-stop activities.

Moving violations were the most commonly identified reason for stops, regardless of race. African American and "other" drivers were stopped for moving violations at slightly higher rates, while Hispanic and white drivers were stopped more often for non-moving violations.

Drivers received citations, the most commonly identified disposition, at similar rates regardless of race. Ninety percent of stops resulted in a citation.

Search rates, however, varied by race. One of eight stopped Hispanic drivers was searched compared to one of 13 stopped African American drivers and one of 14 stopped white drivers.

Troopers seized physical evidence, such as weapons, drugs, vehicles, and stolen property in 25.5 percent of all searches. Searched Hispanic drivers had physical evidence seized at a rate of 15% compared to 25% of white drivers and 28% of searched African American drivers. White drivers had drugs seized at a higher rate than other racial groups.

The Comptroller's report notes that troopers receive some pre-service and in-service cultural diversity training, but may need more specific training on vehicle stops.

Ethel Detch, Director of the Office of Research, cautions that such studies should be interpreted thoughtfully. "Although the results of this analysis are thought-provoking, there are many unanswered questions. I hope readers won't leap to conclusions based on the data. Many factors affect whether a law enforcement officer stops a motorist for a violation," she said.

The report recommends that Tennessee Highway Patrol officials reflect on the stop and post-stop data presented and use it to inform statewide and district-level policies, procedures, and training.

Tennessee Highway Patrol Vehicle Stops During 2006: A Summary, is available on the Comptroller's website at www.comptroller.state.tn.us.

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