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Council on Crime and Justice unveils racial disparity findings

By Michelle Bruch

Downtown West was one of five neighborhoods wherein African Americans were confronted in traffic stops more often than other races between May and October 2000, according to new research.

The Council on Crime and Justice says racial disparity in traffic stops is difficult to explain, but may stem from the geographic concentration of policing activity in a few neighborhoods that are more diverse.

Traffic-stop research and 16 other studies were discussed in a day-long forum on June 28 that created a partnership among the mayor, police chief and the Minneapolis Public School system.

The council's statistics were sometimes striking: The rate of arrest for select low-level offenses in 2001 was one in four among blacks, and one in 60 among whites. Although blacks were 15 times more likely to be arrested for misdemeanor crimes than whites in 2001, blacks were only seven times more likely than whites to be convicted.

According to council research, populations of color may be disproportionately likely to encounter the justice system as a result of extensive policing of geographic "hot spots."

To address that issue, the council has suggested more community involvement to address low-level offenses in crime hot spots, such as enhanced communication that cuts to the underlying causes of crime.

The Downtown Minneapolis Neighborhood Association (DMNA), which incorporates Downtown East and Downtown West, is drafting a code of conduct that stipulates unacceptable minor offenses. The code is designed to give law enforcement another tool when confronting nuisance crimes.

Following a 2001 community meeting that discussed livability crime, the Council on Crime and Justice said community members differ on how to address low-level crimes.

"Community members held opposing views regarding police action toward individuals suspected of committing [low-level] offenses," stated the study. "Some took the position

that police action was a form of harassment, or simply a fishing expedition, which might lead to charges for more serious crimes. Alternatively, others took the position that low-level offenders were not taken seriously by the criminal justice system beyond the point of police contact and thus repeat offending was not deterred.”

A council study determined that more than 70 percent of people arrested for misdemeanor crimes had no prior felony convictions, they but did have misdemeanor convictions. Low-level offenses in the study include driving after license revocation or cancellation, no valid drivers license, disorderly conduct, loitering with intent to commit prostitution, loitering with intent to sell narcotics, and lurking with intent to commit a crime.

The Council on Crime and Justice has concluded that police should be judicious about making arrests for low-level offenses.

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