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Forum discusses racial disparities

Statistics drawn from studies point to a crime gap dividing races.

By Sara Schweid

More than 600 lawyers, judges, police officers and community activists answered the Council on Crime and Justice's "Call-to-Justice" at a June 28 forum at Minneapolis Community and Technical College.

The forum focused on racial disparity in the Minnesota criminal justice system.

The event gave the council an opportunity to present a synthesis of its past 17 studies, most of which related to understanding the causes and consequences of racial disparity.

A council study found that for every 100,000 people in each racial group, 4,138 blacks were arrested, while only 404 whites were arrested. That's a racial disparity of 10-to-1, and more than twice the national average of 4-to-1.

Tom Johnson, president of the council, said the results probably were not a shock to anyone.

"The existence of the disparity has been known," Johnson said. "We spent quite a bit of time five years ago documenting the disparity, which was one of the worst in the nation."

Liz Riggs, a University junior, volunteers for an organization called Working at the Court House, where she attends trials each week to look for sentencing trends and potential flaws in the process.

"I wasn't too surprised with the findings, because I see this sort of thing on a daily basis," Riggs said. "And WATCH, in some of its own research, has come to some of the same conclusions."

The data the council collected came from studying more than 200,000 traffic stops, from 65 locations across the state. The results showed some distinct signs of racial disparity, Johnson said.

Another statistic Johnson pointed out was the finding that blacks are 15 times more likely to be arrested for low-level offenses, such as loitering or disorderly conduct, and seven times more likely to be convicted.

Another finding noted black men have reported drug use that's 51 percent higher than their white counterparts, but their arrest rate was 400 percent higher nationally and 1,000 percent higher in Minnesota.

"There's something really wrong with that," Riggs said. "It's not an adequate system of justice when there are people who are unfairly prosecuted or arrested, or people go through the system unfairly just because of their race."

Greg Hestness, chief of police for the University, said that while racial bias on the part of police might be one explanation for the disparity, a big part of the problem might be communities with a lot of crime happen to be disproportionately nonwhite areas.

"You're going to go to the neighborhoods where the greatest needs are, and if they happen to be predominately minority neighborhoods, then you're going to generate disproportionate numbers just by doing the job you need to do," Hestness said.

According to council data, nonwhite communities in Minnesota have increased in population since 1980 by more than 200 percent. During that time, the white population in the state - the only population which experienced a decline - decreased by 9.3 percent.

But Hestness said the fear of skewing the data can't change the way the police do their job.

"You can't walk away from it," he said. "You can't say 'Well, I'm not going to police the north side at the level it needs to be because if I do, that might create statistical disparities.' "

Johnson said he thinks one of the reasons for Minnesota's racial disparity is that the state has not adjusted to its changing population.

"The state has historically had such a homogeneous population that it's only been very recently that we've had to deal with persons of color in any numbers," Johnson said. "And we're not very good at figuring out how to do that."

Johnson said an important way to make changes is to take the automatic burden of response off the police. There are situations, he said, where the community might be a better judge of punishment.

"(Community members) have, in many cases, better knowledge or intelligence about what's going on, about what might be the underlying issue here, than do the police," Johnson said.

When asked if the state's racial disparity could change, Johnson said change was the only option.

"It absolutely has to, and I believe it can," Johnson said. "I believe we can be a safer community if it does. In fact, we can only be a safer community if it does."