

Ann Arbor police come out well on profiling - Study shows officers are sensitive to race

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Whenever it appears, the discriminatory practice of racial profiling not only demeans the minorities targeted by police but dangerously heightens tension between them.

That has happened in cities from Los Angeles to Louisville to towns along the New Jersey Turnpike, where officers in recent years have pulled over vehicles driven by minorities - usually African-Americans - more often than those driven by whites. Along the New Jersey Turnpike, blacks were being stopped almost 500 percent more often than whites.

In Ann Arbor four years ago, complaints of racial profiling became great enough that the Ann Arbor Human Rights Commission asked the City Council to commission an independent study of the practice and to provide officer training in racial profiling and cultural diversity.

The attention drawn to the issue, and the work done by the police department to eradicate any profiling in the city, appears to have born fruit. The report, released last week by Lamberth Consulting, said it found no evidence of racial profiling at nine city intersections. In fact, it found the odds were so low in Ann Arbor that an African-American person would be confronted more often than whites at an intersection by a police officer that the city ranked among the lowest among some 30 reviewed nationwide by the firm.

Many in the minority community credit these welcome results to the emphasis Police Chief Dan Oates has placed on his force treating all minorities fairly and respectfully. Oates had 150 people from his department attend cultural diversity training in 2002, and he says training and conversations on diversity issues are ongoing. After the 9-11 attacks, Oates also took pains to reach out to the Arab and Muslim communities in Ann Arbor to assure them that they would be well treated.

At two of the intersections, Lamberth found that blacks were

about 20 percent more likely than whites to be stopped by police - an incidence that some activists found disturbing.

But Lamberth's overall finding - that the stopping of African-Americans by Ann Arbor police at the nine intersections amounted to an absence of racial profiling - pleased many of the city's civil rights advocates.

"I didn't think this would ever happen in my lifetime," said Rose Martin of the Peace Neighborhood Center.

The commitment to training and discussions about diversity and profiling will continue, Oates said. That's good news for anyone interested in fair and responsible policing in Ann Arbor.