

Burlington Police Commission Summary of and Comments on 2021 Annual Report on Traffic Stops, Arrests, and Uses of Force

June 2022

At the Burlington Police Commission's May meeting, Jonathan Larson, City Data Analyst presented an annual report on traffic stops, arrests, and use of force. The report includes information on racial disparities in policing. Overall, the Commission was very satisfied with the report and appreciates the quality of the analysis and the clarity of the report.

The Commission highlights the following findings in the report.

- **There was a 24% decline in police-involved incidents from 2019 to 2021.**¹ This continues a 6-year decline in incidents, which have fallen by 42% since 2015.
- The most frequent type of incidents are the following (with the share of all incidents in parentheses): 1) suspicious event (9%), 2) welfare check (5%), 3) assistance to other agencies (4.5%), 4) assistance to public (4.5%), 5) mental health issue (4.4%).
- **Several incident types have seen significant increases since 2012, however.**² Mental health incidents, one of the most frequent types of call for service, have increased 91% over this time period, and welfare checks are up 47% since 2012. Also, overdoses are up 72% from the start of pandemic state of emergency.
- **The most urgent type of incident (Priority 1 incidents) rose 9.7% since 2019. Priority 1 incidents, however, have fallen 1.6% since 2015.**
- The most frequent types of Priority 1 incidents in 2021 in descending order (with the share of all Priority 1 incidents in parentheses) were: 1) domestic disturbance (23%), 2) 911 hang-ups (19%), 3) serving protection orders (15%), 4) simple assault (6%), 4) overdose (5.6%).
- While the number of **incidents** represents police services rendered, **offenses** indicate the number of law violations recorded by officers. Offenses are also down modestly from 2019 to 2021. Further, they have fallen 31% since 2012.
- The number of violent offenses fell 13% from 2019 to 2021. This continues a 9-year trend of a decreasing number of violent offenses which have fallen 28% since 2012. This positive trend must be tempered by the great concern caused by the increase in gunfire incidents in 2021, extending now into 2022.
- The number of arrests fell 38% from 2019 to 2021.

¹ Because 2020 was an anomalous year due to COVID, comparisons are made between 2021 and 2019.

² The Burlington Police Department database lists over 100 types of incidents. From 2012 to 2021, 70% of incident types have declined, with the remainder increasing.

- As a result of focus and change in departmental policy, overall traffic stops continue to decrease, helping address historical racial disparities in stop rates. While this is good news, the Commission cautions that this is one year of data of a rather small sample size. The Commission hopes to see evidence that disparities in stops becomes a trend over time.
- The total number of uses of force declined 9% since 2019, and by almost half since 2012.
- Despite these positive trends, racial disparities remain in several areas and are of great concern to the Commission:
 - **Traffic Stops:**
 - Black drivers were 4 times more likely to have no action taken subsequent to a traffic stop than white drivers. This may be evidence of black drivers more likely to be stopped based on pretext than white drivers.
 - Black and Asian drivers were 4 times more likely to be arrested subsequent to a traffic stop than white drivers. More generally, the black share of arrests is vastly
 - Racial disparities in search rates continue. There were 7 vehicle searches in 2021, of which only 1 was of a white driver. Moreover, no contraband was found in any of the searches with the exception of search of the white driver.
 - **Arrests:**
 - Black people comprise 6.2% of Burlington’s population but are 21% of arrestees. They are thus almost 3 and a half times more likely to be arrested than would be expected, given their share of the population.
 - When an arrest is made, a person may be cited (receive a notice to appear in court and be released), or be lodged (that is, taken into custody). Black people are thus almost twice as likely to be lodged as white people, and are half as likely to be referred to the Community Justice Center (an alternative to arrest).
 - **Use of Force:**
 - Despite decreasing uses of force over time since 2012, the percentage of incidents where the subject is black has consistently increased. In 2019, 26% of use-of-force subjects were black, while blacks comprise just 6.2% of Burlington’s population. By 2021, that figure rose to 36%. That is, in 2021, black people were subjects of use-of-force at a rate that was almost 6 times greater than would be expected, given their population share.

While noting improvement in several areas, the Commission has several concerns about the data provided in this year’s report:

- Missing data continue to be a problem that is especially worrisome when it concerns race data. The Commission would like to see a robust plan for monitoring data entry and a process for requesting officers to supply missing data, such that missing race data is eliminated by next year.

- Commissioners noted that black-white racial disparities in use-of-force suggest that Burlington police officers see black people as inherently threatening or dangerous. This is especially evident in incidents involving non-violent offenses, where black subjects are much more likely to have a gun pointed at them than similarly situated white subjects. The Commission has requested that the City and Burlington Police Department engage the services of the Center for Policing Equity to assist in a review of incident level data to understand the situation that lead to racial disparities in use of force and mechanisms to reduce disparities.

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