

The Importance of Data in Building Community Police Relations

John Lamberth, Ph. D.
President, Lamberth Consulting

I would like to express my appreciation to the Special Rapporteur for Minority Issues for the invitation to speak to this forum. Today, I would like describe our work over the last several years in determining whether racial profiling is occurring and working with community groups in the cities where the police have invited us to analyze their data.

I turn immediately to data that are necessary to determine whether a police agency is targeting minorities either as motorists or as pedestrians. A stop by the police can begin a process in which an individual is caught up in the justice system and if that stop is made because the individual is a minority it may well be discriminatory. Therefore it is important to have a record of all police stops including those that do not result in a citation or other action by the police. The data should include, at a minimum, the race/ethnicity of the person stopped, the date and time, exact location, reason for the stop and any action taken by the police on the basis of the stop, such as restraining or searching the individual, or an arrest. If a search is conducted, a record should be kept of any contraband confiscated by the police. In many countries at least some of these data are routinely recorded.

The next step in data analysis is to determine a standard against which the stop data will be compared. We routinely determine the race/ethnicity of the population from which the police select people to stop. This means that we send trained observers to the locations

selected for study and determine the proportion of people of minority status who are at that location. This is the standard (benchmark) we use to determine whether police are targeting minority motorists or pedestrians. We have worked diligently to find a benchmark to utilize that is less cumbersome than sending observers out to record the race/ethnicity of people who make up the benchmark. Quite frankly, the most available benchmark in many countries, census data, has proven to be so unreliable in the United States that I warn against its use.

While data analysis is vitally important in our work, it is not our ultimate goal. To move toward the goal of nondiscrimination it is crucial to work with both police and community members to change their perceptions of each other. In the vast majority of cities where we have worked, we are met with two groups of people with diametrically opposed points of view. The police, almost inevitably, do not believe that they are discriminating against minorities and, quite frankly it is extremely difficult for police agencies to know if they are discriminating without having an analysis done. Members of minority communities are equally convinced that police are targeting them. This means that our work will prove one group's perceptions to be in error. I estimate that in the 40 or so police departments where I have worked, about half the time we find that police are targeting minorities. In those cases we attempt to convince the police to change their policies, procedures, reward structures and the like to change their discriminatory behavior. In the instances that we find the police are not targeting minorities, we have an equally difficult job of convincing the minority community that it's long held perception of the police is erroneous.

The most important element of our work is the ultimate goal that we espouse. It is our firm belief and commitment to the principal that if police and community work together, it provides a safer, more secure and amicable society in which to live.

I wish to end this presentation with an exciting project that we are involved in. Two years ago we were retained by the Kalamazoo, Michigan police department to conduct an analysis of their pattern of stopping motorists. Much to the department's shock the results indicated that they were targeting African Americans. To their credit, they began a long process in an attempt to change the culture of their organization. To a degree that we have not previously seen, they began by revising policies that might impact on this issue. They have changed the way their front line supervisors work with officers to encourage them to consider whether their actions are in any way discriminatory. They have carefully trained their officers and changed the emphasis that their Field Training Officers use to conduct on the job training of new officers. Further, they have changed the reward structure for officers assuring that officers are rewarded for working cooperatively with the community in their joint goal of providing a safe community. The community has also begun to understand the pressures and conditions that police officers encounter and why they seek to protect themselves. The next step is for us to conduct a reanalysis of their stop data and report to the community. We are very hopeful that this change in the way two formerly uncooperative groups have changed their perceptions of each other will provide lasting change.