

UPDATED TESTIMONY ON 13-S 352

STATISTICS ON THE PRIMARY SEAT BELT LAW AND RACIAL PROFILING

June 18, 2013

- Two years ago, when the primary seat belt legislation was passed, the community was promised a serious look at the effect of the seat belt bill as to who is and is not pulled over. Indeed, that was a key reason for the inclusion of a sunset clause. But instead of a robust study covering two years, the only information that has been released is just six months of incomplete data compiled by Northeastern University. As rough as that data is, though, it raises serious concerns about racial disparities in seat belt stops.
- According to the US Census Bureau, 7 percent of Rhode Island residents are black, but black drivers made up 14% of the drivers stopped for a seat belt violation, according to this preliminary analysis. That is, based on their representation in the population, **black drivers were stopped twice as often for seat belt violations as should be expected.** The statistics are even more problematic when one focuses solely on the populations of the 21 municipalities whose data was used for the study.
- Although the number of reported searches conducted was too small to be conclusive, it is nonetheless worth noting that for primary seat belt stops resulting in a search of the vehicle, **half of all drivers searched were non-white.**
- We often hear racial profiling is a problem confined to Providence. Yet this report did not include data gathered from Providence. This is a statewide problem.
- All of this is in line with prior racial profiling studies done by Northeastern University. In 2003 and 2006 Northeastern found that black and Latino drivers were more likely than white drivers to be stopped by the police, and twice as likely as white drivers to be searched, even though white drivers were more likely to be found with contraband when searched. Ten years later, this data indicates nothing has gotten better.
- In short, despite assurances from state officials that a primary seat belt law would not promote racial profiling, the limited statistics that have been made available suggest otherwise.