



128 DORRANCE STREET, SUITE 220
PROVIDENCE, RI 02903
401.831.7171 (t)
401.831.7175 (f)
www.riaclu.org

April 2, 2015

Tony Pires
Director of Administration
Pawtucket City Hall
137 Roosevelt Avenue
2nd Floor Room 200
Pawtucket, RI 02860

Dear Director Pires:

We found quite disturbing, as we trust you did, the article that recently appeared in the *Valley Breeze* documenting allegations of racism among officers of the Pawtucket Police Department. On behalf of the ACLU of Rhode Island, I am writing to urge you to take specific steps to look more closely into possible race-related police practices beyond those that have thus far been cited.

We were pleased to learn that you have ordered an internal investigation into the allegations that have been raised, but we also believe that something very important may be missing from that investigation. The specific allegations that have been reported involve the use of racially inappropriate language by some officers, as well as some concerns that the attitudes reflected by such language infect hiring and promotion decisions for minority officers. But there is a potentially much deeper issue that has not been mentioned. If some police officers are apt to offhandedly use derogatory *language* against racial minorities, one should be even more concerned about the *actions* they may be taking against them.

In that regard, we have examined the statistical evidence regarding the Pawtucket Police Department's record in stopping and searching drivers in response to alleged motor vehicle violations. Those statistics paint a very damning picture, and one that we strongly believe needs to be part of any investigation into the Department's practices.

Since 2001, there have been three separate occasions when police departments across the state have been required to gather race-based data on their stops and searches of motor vehicles. Laws enacted by the General Assembly in 2000 and 2004 required detailed reporting of traffic stops for two and one year periods, respectively. All police departments gathered data again in 2014 as part of a statewide study. An examination of that data for all three periods shows a very troubling pattern by Pawtucket police that, particularly in light of the recent allegations, warrants a very thorough public investigation.

The enclosed chart, which our organization prepared for a report that we issued two months ago, documents the problem very clearly. Over the course of the three traffic stop studies, we examined ten police departments that, according to the data, engaged in the most stops and/or searches of motor vehicles. Pawtucket was one of those departments. In each of the three studies, the Pawtucket Police Department appears to have ranked among the worst in terms of searching racial minorities.

Specifically, of the ten departments studied, the statistics show the following consistent pattern over more than a decade:

* In 2001-2002, Pawtucket police searched black and Latino drivers more than 3.5 times as often as white drivers – the second highest ratio among the ten departments examined.

* In 2004-2005, Pawtucket's ratio of non-white to white searches was the highest among all ten departments. The disparity rate declined (as it did in most other jurisdictions, due at least in part to a new statutory ban on consent searches), but the disparity itself – searching minority drivers approximately 2 ½ times as often as whites – was at the top of the list.

* In 2014, Pawtucket once again had the second highest ratio of non-white to white traffic searches, searching black and Latino drivers about three times as often as white drivers.

Needless to say, the consistency of the data is extraordinarily troubling. It suggests that racial discrimination in the Department may extend far beyond the occasional use of racist language by a few police officers to a pattern of conduct that permeates daily law enforcement practices as well.

Under the circumstances, we believe it is incumbent upon the City to expand the nature of its investigation. It should include an in-depth examination of the statistical information available to it to determine the causes for these long-standing, widespread racial disparities in traffic searches; an examination of police traffic policies and procedures to determine if any facially-neutral practices may be partially responsible for some of these large discrepancies; a commitment to continue to collect, and engage in an on-going in-depth analysis, of traffic stop data; and the drafting of a concrete plan of action to address the serious inequities documented by the traffic stop statistics.

Page Three
Director Tony Pires
April 2, 2015

Recent comments from the Mayor's office have already attempted to minimize the allegations that have been made by the minority police officers, but these statistics only heighten our concern about the depth and severity of the problem. This cannot and should not be swept under the rug as merely a problem of a few police officers occasionally speaking in inappropriate ways.

I look forward to hearing back from you about this. Thank you in advance for your attention to these concerns.

Sincerely,



Steven Brown
Executive Director

Enclosure

cc: Chief Paul King
The Hon. Donald Grebien
Pawtucket City Council
City Clerk Richard Goldstein

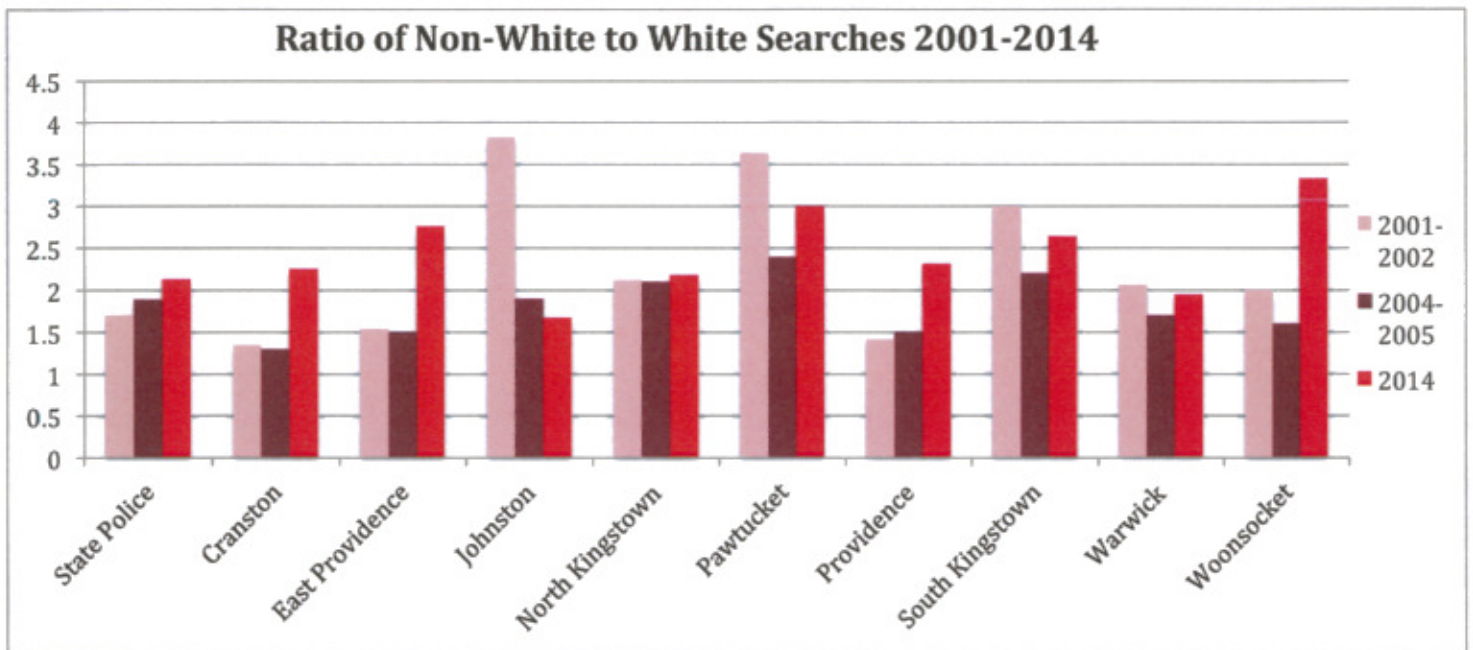


Figure 9. Racial Disparity in Discretionary Searches - Ratio of Non-White Searches to White Searches