

## ACLU: Black motorists in Tampa get more tickets for seat belts Statewide results might indicate racial profiling, group says - Statewide results might indicate racial profiling, group says

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Black motorists in Florida are nearly twice as likely as white drivers to receive tickets for seat belt violations, according to a report released Wednesday by the American Civil Liberties Union.

The ACLU report specifically criticized Tampa and Miami police for failing to follow Florida law requiring racial data be provided to the state on seat belt citations.

The civil rights organization obtained 2014 numbers from Tampa through a public records request and found that city police officers issued 575 seat belt citations to black motorists and 549 to white motorists, even though blacks made up only 23 percent of the Tampa population.

The ACLU report lands as the Justice Department continues its investigation into whether Tampa police are unfairly targeting blacks for bicycle citations. That investigation came at the request of Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn and former Police Chief Jane Castor after the department was criticized for the number of citations issued to black bicyclists. According to the police department's records, about 81 percent of the bicycle citations issued in 2014 went to black riders. Regarding the ACLU seat belt report, TPD spokesman Stephen Hegarty said Wednesday the department provides copies of all its seat belt citations to the state, so the state has its data. "If there's a requirement that we send them in a particular format, then we will, but they have our numbers because they have the actual citations," Hegarty said. Hegarty said issuing seat belt citations is a safety issue that the department takes seriously, both through education and enforcement.

"We are going to be aggressive about education and aggressive about enforcement, because it's a safety issue," Hegarty said. "Just this year, somebody lost their life because they weren't wearing a safety belt."

As for the racial disparities, Hegarty said he wanted more information about the ACLU's methodology and how the organization reached its conclusions.

"We enforce the law regardless of race, regardless of neighborhood because we think it's important that everybody wear safety belts," he said. "I'm sure the police chief will read the report with some interest."

Statewide, the report says, black people made up 13.5 percent of the estimated Florida resident driver population in 2014, but received about 22 percent of the seat belt citations reported to the state. The report cited four sheriff's departments — Escambia, Palm Beach, Orange and Broward counties — for especially high percentages of seat belt citations going to black motorists.

According to data filed by other local law enforcement departments with the state in 2014, seat belt citations more closely reflected racial population numbers. For example, the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office wrote 3,499 seat belt citations that year, with 75.5 percent going to white motorists and 17.5 percent to blacks. Census numbers show that 24 percent of the county population is black and 75.3 percent is white.

That year, the Pasco Sheriff's Office wrote 883 seat belt tickets, with 90 percent going to whites and 5.5 percent to blacks. Census numbers show that 89.4 percent of the county population is white and 5.6 percent is black.

The St. Petersburg Police Department also apparently didn't provide its data to the state, but information about that was not available late Wednesday afternoon. The ACLU report says the statewide statistics raise "serious concerns" about possible racial profiling by law enforcement in enforcing seat belt safety laws. The organization calls for an investigation by county commissions and the attorney general to determine the cause and what action needs to be taken. The ACLU also urged the Legislature to consider a law creating consequences for law enforcement agencies that don't comply with the law requiring them to report their racial data to the state.

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