

LOCAL

Exclusive: 9 out of 10 people arrested by Texas DPS in Austin are Black or Hispanic, data show

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Nearly nine out of 10 people arrested on misdemeanor charges by the Texas Department of Public Safety through a controversial operation with Austin police are Black or Hispanic, new data obtained by the American-Statesman show, fueling debate about the future and viability of the program.

The data, compiled by Travis County Attorney Delia Garza's office, triggered a meeting Thursday afternoon with Garza, Austin Police Chief Joe Chacon, Travis County District Attorney José Garza and other law enforcement and criminal justice leaders to address what the county attorney called "deeply concerning" information.

"If the goal is to address violent crime, this is not the right approach," Delia Garza told the Statesman. "Maybe there is room for other law enforcement agencies to play a role in a strategy, but it is important that we all get together and convene a meeting and talk about what that strategy should look like."

More: Some questions still surround DPS partnership among city leaders

The data was compiled by prosecutors who went through 167 arrest affidavits since the operation began. The suspects were arrested on low-level drug offenses, drunken driving and other crimes.

Austin's population is about 48% minority.

Officials have said that DPS troopers are being deployed to Austin neighborhoods where police are receiving calls — although they are generally not responding to calls — that indicate where crime is occurring.

"APD has just been made aware of the information released by the county attorney's office, and we are working to understand what the information represents," Chacon told the Statesman. "We are going to be asking to work with our partners at DPS, the county attorney and the district attorney's office to look at arrest data so that information can be more closely and fully analyzed and reported to the public as quickly as we can."

Texas DPS partnership was controversial from the start

Austin attorney Rick Cofer, who has been following the effort closely, said he is alarmed and troubled by the information.

"This data shows without a doubt that DPS does not share Austin values and do not follow Austin policies and procedures," he said. "This is more than smoke, and it certainly looks like a fire that DPS may be racially profiling in Austin."

It is difficult to easily compare the DPS arrest data in Austin with arrests made by Austin police. That data were not immediately available for misdemeanor arrests.

Also Thursday, Gov. Greg Abbott announced that DPS special agents had seized over a half million lethal doses of fentanyl. The agents were assigned to the Austin Violent Crimes Task Force, he said.

"Today marks one month since I directed the Texas Department of Public Safety to provide assistance to the Austin Police Department to help reduce crime and improve safety in the city, and I am proud to see the hard work of these brave men and women saving innocent lives," he said in a statement.

Two people were arrested and will face federal charges, Abbott said. The suspects indicated the drugs came from Mexico, he added.

The Austin police partnership has been controversial from the start. Mayor Kirk Watson has previously said that it grew out of a conversation he had with top state leaders, including Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, in which Patrick offered DPS assistance. It came after several high-profile public safety incidents that raised alarm among some state Republican leaders.

In a presentation to the City Council last week, council members shared their concerns with Austin police leaders about over policing in certain neighborhoods after many residents reported seeing an increased presence of officers, causing them to feel that their neighborhood was being targeted.

Chacon told council members that was not the case, and that response was call driven. However, he could not provide specific data on where police were responding nor the demographics of people who were being stopped.

Neighbors worry about racial profiling by DPS troopers

Neighbors in the Montopolis neighborhood held a rally Friday at the entrance to their neighborhood on East Riverside Drive to denounce what they feel is racial profiling by DPS troopers. The neighborhood is made up of several Black and Hispanic families.

Susana Almanza, who lives in the neighborhood and is co-director of nonprofit PODER, said she and many of her neighbors are sick of feeling afraid and targeted, and they want to see the data to support Chacon's claims.

"There are more troopers in Montopolis than we have schools," she said. "There are more troopers in Montopolis than we have playgrounds. ... This has got to stop."

On Thursday, Council Member Chito Vela, who represents portions of East Austin, said the city needs effective crime prevention but without using overly aggressive or discriminatory tactics to achieve it.

"My priority at the moment is information," he said. "To make sound decisions based on the data, we need the actual data. I don't want statistics hand-selected to give a certain impression. I want the actual numbers."