OPINION SECTION OF THE DAILY JOURNAL

By Gary Ingemunson

In high school statistics, students learn that they can plot results in any one of a number of ways, in order to support whatever argument they are making. If the curve is too flat, adjust the parameters of the x and y variables and the angle of the curve will change. Hence, if someone asks you to find statistics to prove his or her point, it is very easy to do so.

Which brings us to the ACLU asking Dr. Ian Ayres to find racial profiling in statistics that the LAPD found to be insufficiently detailed to be the basis of any such conclusions.

Surprise—he found what he was looking for.

We are not going to dispute the charts and graphs that Ayres came up with, because we can assume that his math work is just fine. But we do take issue with the underlying assumptions. As cops, we understand, in fact we are trained, to be very wary of assumptions in the first place, and especially trained to avoid creating assumptions without enough specific situational knowledge. And Ayres has made a series of assumptions that have no bearing on reality. For instance, he plots his data against the racial profile of the officer who wrote the stop report. Of course, from where he sits, he doesn't understand that the decision to engage in a stop is made by pairs of officers, and more often than not, those officers look nothing like each other. So, even when white officers (who represent only 38.6 percent of the department) are involved in a stop, chances are their partners are African American (12.1 percent of the department) or Hispanic (40.2 percent of the department) or even Asian (6.7 percent of the department). And conversely, while he commends African American officers for making less stops of African Americans, the majority of those officers are paired with officers who aren't African American, so that statistic is utterly meaningless. In fact, nowhere in his report does Ayres even allude to the fact that most officers in the LAPD are from minority populations.

LAPD officers are far from homogeneous in other ways as well—which is why grouping them into statistical categories by race is an absurd and meaningless exercise. They are 18.7 percent female, they represent most of the ethnicities and religions and languages in Los Angeles, and, like the rest of Americans, some are multi-racial, further confounding the ability to group them in neat racial categories.

Ayres also points out that in the Central Division, "there were more stops of blacks and Hispanics in a single year than there were black and Hispanic residents." We could give Ayres the benefit of the doubt on this that he was simply stating this for dramatic purposes — because as a researcher, he must know better than to suggest that there is any real correlation between who lives in a neighborhood and who travels through it, or who commits crimes within its borders. Central includes

Skid Row, which has both one of the highest crime rates, and one of the highest arrest rates in the city.

More to the point, as Chief William Bratton has pointed out, Ayres doesn't have any information about each individual stop—and policing is first and foremost about individual police officers making specific decisions in order to improve public safety, reduce crime and impede criminal activity. In the real world, not the world of statistical analysis, officers in high crime, and particularly in gang-infested neighborhoods, play very close attention to what is going on in the streets. Their job is to stop suspicious-looking individuals, whom they believe are engaged in criminal activity. These are legitimate stops, even in the absence of finding contraband.   Ayres assumes that these are mistakes—or harassment. He has not, for instance, run statistics to compare the individual subjects of these stops with their arrest records. Nor has he run statistical data to assess the individual basis for each stop—and plotted that against the criminal activity in the immediate neighborhood of the stops. For instance, if a car meeting a certain description is involved in a crime, it makes sense that officers will stop all cars meeting that description.

But there is a bigger issue, and this is where the real world collides with the world of the ivory tower and the ACLU. Most residents of L.A. would tell you that the major threat to the quality of life for all Angelenos is gang violence. Gangs are not equal opportunity membership organizations, and in Los Angeles, they are a scourge of poverty-stricken Hispanic and African American communities. Most of the murders in Los Angeles are black-on-black or Hispanic-on-Hispanic, and most of them are gang-related. LAPD officers spend more time in these neighborhoods and therefore make more stops in these neighborhoods, trying to reduce gang violence and protect law abiding residents from the crossfire.

When we look at LAPD statistically, we see that gang-related crime in Los Angeles has dropped more than 25 percent since 2002 (year to date through Oct. 18, 2008). We can thank the hard work of LAPD officers for that. Where we see crime reduction in neighborhoods with a significant police presence, Ayres is missing the forest for the trees and sifting through garbage-in, garbage-out data to construct a narrative that meets his own preconceived assumptions.

We are sure that Ayres and the ACLU would agree with us that gang violence stems from real inequalities; inequalities of access to education, to after-school programs and to paying jobs. We invite Ayres and our new neighbors on 8th Street, the ACLU of Southern California, to turn their attention away from the kind of statistical game-playing that is here and to some meaningful work that will rescue Los Angeles' kids from gangs. When this kind of social and economic disparity has been solved, then and only then will the kind of number crunching that Ayres is engaging in be at all meaningful.

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