

Pot and the Police in Rhode Island

An investigation by the Media and Law class at URI

To learn how Rhode Island's public access law works, the Media and Law class at the University of Rhode Island investigated marijuana enforcement across R.I. With data from departments representing about 85 percent of the state's population, the class found:

- Enforcement since 2012 has decreased by almost 50%, the last full year possession of under an ounce was a misdemeanor.
- The 26 surveyed departments made about 1,900 criminal arrests for possession of under an ounce in 2012.
- Since decriminalization April 1, 2013, the surveyed departments have been writing about 1,000 citations a year.
- Urban departments including Providence, Woonsocket, East Providence and Cranston write relatively few possession citations.
- The likelihood of getting a citation varies widely from department to department.
- In 2015, for example, Providence police issued 26 citations for possession.
- Warwick, with half Providence's population, wrote 10 times as many (296) citations in 2015.
- Cumberland and Coventry are about the same size. Yet Coventry has written 196 citations and Cumberland 33 since decriminalization.
- Warwick wrote the most citations by far — 934 from 2013 to 2017 — raising \$774,000 in fines.
- Males are far more likely to be cited for possession.
- In the nine departments that provided data on gender, males outnumbered females 1,252 to 250. Johnston was the exception. It cited males and females equally.
- Marijuana enforcement is most likely during traffic stops.
- Six departments provided racial data with Johnston and Newport police arresting or citing a disproportionate number of African Americans.

Department reports

(Data for 2013 and 2017 are for part years.)

Barrington wrote 13 citations in 2015. That jumped to 32 in 2016 and 22 as of Oct. 4.

Bristol citations peaked at 83 in 2015. The total was just 19 in the fall of 2017.

Coventry citations peaked in 2016 and 2017, with a total of 124 when surveyed.

Cranston made 132 possession arrests in 2012, but has written just 188 citations since then.

Cumberland had 46 arrests in 2012. But has written just 33 citations since then.

East Greenwich, after writing just 12 citations from 2014 to 2016, it had written 19 when surveyed this fall.

East Providence has written 75 citations in four years.

Johnston was the only department that arrested or cited more African Americans than whites. From 2012 to 2017, Johnston arrested or cited 106 African Americans compared to 98 whites. Hispanics, Johnston reported, were cited or arrested 32 times in that period. Nearly 90 percent of Johnston is white.

Lincoln: data was incomplete.

Middletown wrote 69 citations in 2016 and 75 in 2017 when surveyed this fall.

Narragansett wrote 99 citations in 2015 and 2016, but it had written only 9 when surveyed this fall.

Newport had been writing 35-55 citations a year. This year, citations jumped to 66 when surveyed. Out of the 293 total arrests and citations, 151 were white and 80 were African Americans, who make up about 8 percent of the city's population.

North Kingstown has written between 38 and 60 citations a year.

North Providence wrote 14 citations in 2016. When surveyed this fall, the department had already written 43.

North Smithfield citations peaked at 40 in 2015.

Pawtucket writes between 100 and 150 citations a year.

Portsmouth wrote 60 citations in 2014, its peak year.

Providence made 310 arrests in 2012, but then averaged just 33 citations a year 2014-2016.

South Kingstown wrote 97 citations in 2014. Since then, the department has written 141.

Smithfield averages about 60 citations a year.

Tiverton made 23 marijuana arrests in 2012. Since then, its total number of citations don't total 23.

Warren wrote one citation in 2016.

Warwick is R.I.'s citation leader with 934 possession citations since 2013.

West Warwick averaged 46 citations a year 2014-2016 with the most written by a small group of officers. That number had fallen to 18 when surveyed this fall.

Westerly has written 352 citations since decriminalization, one of the state leaders.

Woonsocket had written only two citations when surveyed this fall.

SOURCE. APRA requests filed with 26 department by the 32 members of the the Fall 2017 Media and Law Class at the University of Rhode Island. Not all departments were surveyed. The priority was given to the larger cities and towns with data collected from departments representing 85% of the state's population.

*Report compiled by URI journalism instructor Peter Phipps
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