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Data on traffic stops is lacking

Tampa Bay police say racial profiling is not an issue. But where's the proof?

BY KAVITHA SURANA
Times Staff Writer

Across Tampa Bay, law enforcement agencies say they take concerns over racial profiling seriously.

But when the *Tampa Bay Times* requested comprehensive traffic stop databases from six major police departments and sheriff's agencies in the area — statistics readily available in some U.S. jurisdictions and that experts say is necessary for a thorough analysis — none could provide them.

Three agencies shared reports that captured demographic breakdowns of citations and warnings, a limited view of total traffic stops.

More data could be pulled from citations, but officials said that would be time-consuming and costly.

Agencies said they can quickly investigate any racial bias complaint, using police records and body cameras.

But officials said that type of investigation is rare.

"Since implementing body-worn cameras (last August), only a single complaint of racial profiling was received, investigated and determined to be unfounded," Hillsborough Sheriff Chad Chronister said.

Criminal justice researchers say collecting deeper data on all traffic stops allows agencies to identify disparities and patterns that go beyond individual complaints. And they say making that information easily accessible to the public is crucial for accountability. Increasing accountability and transparency have been persistent demands in the wake of protests sparked by George Floyd's murder.

"Rigorous data analysis sets the table for a frank and robust community conversation about next steps," said Hilary See **VIOLATIONS, 4A**

Red Tide



Photos by DOUGLAS R. CLIFFORD | Times

Tyler Tucker, left, works with his dad, Toliver, to release nets filled with dead fish onto the deck of the shrimp boat *Southbound*.

Grim reapers of the Tide

BY ZACHARY T. SAMPSON
Times Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — Toliver and Jessica Tucker are used to the dark, oily water, the bulging eyes, the gray flesh decaying to a pulp in the city's bays.

They have even become accustomed to the smell — God, the smell — of all the rotting fish in gruesome flotillas, victims of a toxic Red Tide in Tampa Bay.

But the maggots? The maggots are new. White and wriggling, they circle the scales of rotting sheepshead. They climb seawalls at the water's edge.

The other day, Toliver saw one inching up the cockpit of the shrimp boat he and his wife sail as contractors in the urgent effort to drag millions of pounds of dead fish from Tampa Bay.

"These canals are sick," said Toliver, 43. "It's devastating. I've thought about crying."

Pinellas County has hired an ad hoc armada of shrimp boats like the Tuckers' to comb local waters with nets. About 30 boats have helped; in total, the county has collected more than 1,518 tons of dead sea life and debris from the beaches to the bay. And the work continues.

The boats are the most effective tool for keeping fish off land, where they are not only a grisly sight but harder to pick up once they become entangled in sand, trees and rocks. Cleaning the bay is not just a matter of vanity. The dead fish, if left to degrade, could supply more nutrients to fuel Red Tide.

Most days, the Tuckers awaken about 4:30 **See TIDE, 5A**

A day on the 'Southbound' reveals the true depth of tragedy wrought by the bloom.



Dead fish skimmed from the Intracoastal Waterway pile up on the *Southbound*. Red Tide is also suspected of killing manatees. **Local, 1B**



Times (2019)

Citing health and family concerns, Steve Currall is stepping down as USF president after two years.

USF's ascent encounters 'hiccup'

Currall's abrupt departure as president raises questions on the school's direction.

BY DIVYA KUMAR
Times Staff Writer

Brian Lamb of the state Board of Governors appeared frustrated at a meeting last month in St. Petersburg.

As a University of South Florida graduate and a former chairperson of its board of trustees, he publicly suggested that his old school wasn't

trying hard enough. He pointed out that the university had lowered its goals in six of 10 categories, part of an annual exercise to receive state funding based on performance.

As vice chair of the board, Lamb helps oversee Florida's State University System.

"What's changed so dramatically that we'd need to

reduce that many goals?" he asked USF president Steve Currall, making for an awkward moment in the spotlight. Other Florida universities had set theirs higher, he noted.

Currall and provost Ralph Wilcox tried to assure Lamb that USF was aiming high but they said its goals needed to be realistic, especially in light of the pandemic. Lamb, a banking executive, was not comforted.

"I would just ask, Mr. pres-

ident, if you could take one more look at this. ... I just want to make sure we don't go backwards," he said.

A few weeks later, in a development that stunned the USF community, Currall announced he would step down from the presidency just two years into his tenure. He said the pressures of the job had placed too much stress on his health and family. He plans to take a months- **See PRESIDENT, 3A**

P.M. storms
8 a.m. Noon 4 p.m. 8 p.m.
☀️ ☁️ ☔️ ☔️
80° 88° 92° 84°
40% chance of rain
More, back page of Sports

WITH BRIDGE BARRIER, SUICIDES REDUCED
For the past decade, the Sunshine Skyway has averaged about one suicide a month. Since crews began installing a barrier in January, there has not been one. **Local & State, 1B**

UPDATED LOOKS BUT WITH RETRO CHARM
The Grand Plaza Hotel, the one in St. Pete Beach with the restaurant on top that spins, has gotten a makeover. It's now the Bellwether Beach Resort. Take a tour. **Business, 1D**

A WALK THROUGH NATURAL WONDER
Explore the colorful flora and fauna at the Florida Botanical Gardens in Largo through the eyes and lens of *Tampa Bay Times* photojournalist Martha Asencio-Rhine. **Floridian, 1E**

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Photos by DOUGLAS R. CLIFFORD | Times

Jessica Tucker nets a dead redfish while working with her husband, Toliver Tucker, right, on their shrimp boat, *Southbound*, in the Intracoastal Waterway off Treasure Island.

TIDE continued from 1A

a.m. to drive south from their home in Spring Hill, sometimes with their son. They stripped the livewell from the center of their 25-foot boat, *Southbound*, to make room for all the dead fish they pick up. They start work just after dawn and don't finish until dusk.

In that, they know, they are not alone.

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The Tuckers' first job gathering dead fish was in 2018, when a Red Tide bloom in the Gulf of Mexico cratered their bait shrimp business. No one was fishing near shore, and no one wanted to buy their shrimp.

The timing was awful. Married for nearly two decades, they were about to buy a house.

"We were broke and had nothing in the bank, and they wanted closing costs," Jessica recalled. She was sure they would lose the property. Then the contracting gig came, giving them a steady paycheck.

So far, this year's bloom hasn't been as bad for Tuckers Flats Fishing. The couple works out of Hudson and was still running one boat and crew there to catch enough shrimp for continuing orders.

But if the bloom endures, sales could bottom out again.

The Tuckers sell shrimp for \$60 per thousand. The boat they left behind hauled in 14,500 the other day.

In Pinellas, they make \$170 an hour, Toliver said. They pay for their own gas and expenses and drive an hour or more to reach the boat launch each day. They trailer the *Southbound* every night. Another one of their boats, *Westbound*, was helping with Red Tide, but they recently sent it back to shrimping — typically an overnight job — because the crew struggled with the heat.

The pay is solid, Toliver said, but the work is brutal. "You've got to understand what we're touching."

Toliver grew up in Tarpon Springs and has long fished around Tampa Bay. The couple trawls for shrimp here each fall and winter.

The Tuckers know how life on Florida's west coast rests on a ripple, always spreading from the water. It's why people live here and why they visit, spending money on seaside hotel rooms and rum punches at tiki bars.

If there were no gulf, no Tampa Bay, this would just be another chunk of flat land.

The *Southbound* shoves off from a ramp



Toliver Tucker, center, watches as a load of dead fish is removed from his shrimp boat on the Intracoastal Waterway at St. Pete Beach.

at Demens Landing, passing Doc Ford's Rum Bar & Grille on the St. Pete Pier, where the Tuckers like to grab lunch.

Sometimes, at the end of the day, Toliver lines up the boat and angles the motor so the wake hits the breakwater by the restaurant just right, freeing dead fish from the rocks so they can be netted.

• • •

The shrimp boats pass each other on a course entering and exiting Demens Landing, where a forklift hoists the loads of dead fish they collect into a series of dumpsters. While underway, outriggers stretched wide, the boats look like hulking birds. Each carries a couple of people to manage the nets cast over the edge.

Once the nets are full — and it doesn't take long — the shrimpers gather them to release plumes of dead fish in the middle of the boats, filling green bags with long handles. In an hour or so, maybe even less, the Tuckers can haul away up to 3,000 pounds.

When they finish, spindly fish bones remain, piercing the *Southbound's* nets.

Toliver and Jessica stretch dishwashing gloves over their hands, but inevitably, their bare skin ends up touching dead fish or Red Tide anyway. It feels like an alcohol burn. They carry a 5-gallon bucket of bleach water, in addition to hand sanitizer, wipes and antibiotic ointment.

The GPS screen plots their days in a spiderweb of green lines, past the Vinoy, a string of waterfront parks, around the Historic Old Northeast and up Coffee Pot

Bayou.

This arm of the bay was a hotspot recently, Toliver says, swaths almost entirely covered in dead fish. Where the die-offs are most severe, rotting carcasses drift so close together they look like pavers. It's as though someone could hop off a seawall and walk around without getting wet. The sour air smells like a hundred refrigerators packed with tuna were left unplugged to rot in a parking lot.

The stench gives Toliver a headache. They don't often wear masks, they say, because the boat has an open cockpit that allows for a breeze when they're moving.

He and Jessica leave their rubber boots outside the house when their day is done. On one long drive back to Spring Hill, Toliver felt like he could smell death the whole way home.

They take turns at the wheel of the *Southbound*, and Jessica pulls out her phone in hopes of capturing some sense of what they are witnessing. Like when fish swim in spastic circles before suddenly turning belly up, dying in front of their eyes.

Toliver wishes Gov. Ron DeSantis would come for a ride on the *Southbound*, to see what they see.

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The outboard motor makes the Tuckers' boat maneuverable. Jay Gunter, the man running contractors like them in Pinellas, calls it a mini shrimp boat.

They can pull right up to the seawall by

Video

To watch Toliver and Jessica Tucker help clean up Tampa Bay, go to: youtu.be/JHJ0zBN-ykA

Straub Park, where city workers extend pool skimmers to scoop fish from the tideline.

The job is worse on land. It's slow but necessary work. The Tuckers look on in pity from under the shade of a bimini top.

"They're dying," Toliver says of the crews. "There's no breeze."

Occasionally, city employees will call out, directing boats toward fish kills they cannot reach. In especially tight spaces, under docks and lifted boats, operators use Weedoos — essentially small, floating front-end loaders — to cart debris to the deck of an idling pontoon.

Toliver cuts the *Southbound* northeast, out of sight of downtown toward Venetian Isles. The shoreline is fully developed with luxury homes, touting panoramic views of Tampa Bay and bayside pools adorned by statues. Toliver scans the manicured lawns, trim and green as country club fairways.

Like others who work on the water, the Tuckers blame the April wastewater dump from the Piney Point fertilizer plant for polluting the bay and helping feed this bloom. But they know the release is only one source of contamination.

All the lush lawns around them likely use fertilizer, Toliver thinks, and the runoff puts more nutrients into the bay. He knows the unbroken line of manmade seawalls is not good, either, long ago crowding out mangroves and oyster beds that once helped keep the bay clean and balanced.

The Tuckers pass other shrimpers and a woman on a center console cleaning out dead fish with a teenaged deckhand.

Toliver yells to them all, saying thank you.

He steers the *Southbound* through a marina by Smacks Bayou, where a day earlier they removed thousands of pounds of rotting fish. Toward the back, where the water meets Snell Isle Boulevard, the Tuckers find hundreds of dead fish in a shallow bend.

"Oh my God, it's wretched," Toliver says. "It's just rotting corpses."

The water is cloudy and lifeless. They know oxygen levels have plummeted so much that nothing can survive. For all the carcasses the couple removes, tides and winds blow in more each day.

Toliver thinks about how many families could have been fed with all this seafood, and how long the bigger fish might have lived.

"That's a snook," Jessica says. "No," Toliver says, peering down. "That was a grouper at one time."

The cove would be too narrow for outriggers, so the Tuckers call for a Weeadoo and head off, finding another putrid clot around Cordova Boulevard.

"This is horrible," Toliver says. He spots an eel, a few feet long, that he thinks was some kind of moray. It may be the biggest he's seen. It floats upside down near an empty Four Loko can.

This bothers the Tuckers, how there is often so much garbage mixed in with all the death.

Onshore, a woman spots their boat and steps out to a patio, letting two dogs run along the seawall above the *Southbound*.

Toliver looks up and yells. "We got help on the way, hon."

About this story: Times reporters went out for a few hours on the Southbound on Friday, July 16, with Toliver and Jessica Tucker. The couple gave reporters a tour of the area they have been working and spoke about the process of picking up dead fish. The bloom's worst effects have since moved toward the gulf beaches.

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The Tuckers, dad and son, transport a load of dead fish out of the Intracoastal using trawlers on their boat.