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Indigenous populations, drug dogs linked, analysis finds

By James Robertson
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The state government's use of drug sniffer dogs concentrates disproportionately in areas with Indigenous populations, a new analysis has found.

Statistical analysis of census data and police statistics has found a link between the number of young Indigenous people residing near a police station and the number of searches conducted by the dogs.

In the five parts of Sydney with the highest populations of Indigenous people aged 18-35, a person is 6.5 times more likely to be searched than average, according to the Greens research.

Greens MLC David Shoebridge, a staunch critic of the state's drug policing regime, says the analysis is proof that resources are being deployed discriminatorily.

"This data confirms a long-running suspicion about the police drug dog program," Mr Shoebridge said. "The police have never been able to explain why a train station like Redfern, with a high population of students and Aboriginal people, is constantly hit with drug dogs despite having one of the worst results at finding drugs."

Many of the areas most frequently searched by the dogs correspond with increased nightlife or transport traffic.

But after excluding places drug dogs most frequently patrol around the city's centre, the analysis found a young Indigenous population remained a significant predictor of the number of searches.

The NSW police dispute the findings, saying that the drug dog program is guided solely by intelligence.

"The demographics of an area are not taken into account in these decisions," a spokesman said. "Decisions on where to deploy detection dogs are intelligence-based and focus on locations where the use and supply of illicit drugs is known to have an increased prevalence."

The analysis also underscores the inaccuracy of most of the searches prompted by a reaction from the drug dogs. The research found that in nearly 90 per cent of police commands more than half of searches by the dogs do not find drugs.

Distributed across 80 police commands the analysis finds a 2.5 per cent increase in the number of searches by drug dogs per head of population for every 10 per cent increase in its Indigenous population.

About 8 per cent of police commands conducted nearly one-third of all searches, the research found.

A \$10,000 dollar decrease in an area's average annual income resulted in a 1.3 per cent increase in search activity, the analysis found.

The coalition government expanded the scope of the controversial sniffer dog program, sending dogs onto the state's transport network.

But the use of the dogs fell to a five-year low last year and were used to conduct about 13,000 searches.

Mr Shoebridge said the dogs were doing little to stop the supply of drugs and would create tension between police and indigenous communities.