



## **Racial Profiling in North Carolina: Explanations and Solutions**

*By Dr. Patrick Webb, Saint Augustine's University*

While there has been increased national attention to issues of racial equity, some of the ripple effects have yet to be fully reckoned with. A traffic stop of a Black driver where the officer acts inappropriately or aggressively has significant repercussions for the wellbeing of the driver. But the consequences extend further – individuals sharing these experiences with their families, communities, and colleagues. The resulting damage, particularly to Black communities, underscore the consequences of when city government and law enforcement leaders fail to address difficult and necessary topics, how the actions of law enforcement personnel can influence decisions that extend beyond the immediate attention and awareness of officers, and how the professional treatment of minorities is critical to the potential collective wellbeing of individuals in a specific area.

### **Policy-Minority Interactions and Decisions**

Unfortunately, poor race relations continue to plague progress within the US. This reality is highlighted when examining police-minority interactions and decisions. The disclosure of law enforcement activity data may reveal the extent to which certain levels of unfair treatment are provided. For example, traffic stop data as reported by the largest law enforcement agency in North Carolina reveal significant levels of racial disparities.

Between 2010-2019, Blacks reflect the highest number of traffic stops with a median count of 58,519 followed by whites at 47,230 – this, despite the fact that, within Mecklenburg, whites represent the highest racial category with a reported median amount of 493,868 followed by Blacks with 262,870. There is a significant overrepresentation of Blacks who experience traffic stops, and the data demonstrates that as the population percentage of Blacks increase in a certain area, they are also likely to experience an increase in traffic stops. Simultaneously, as the population percentage of whites decrease, they are less likely to experience traffic stops.

### **Explanations**

Academic research that explores the reasons behind the differential treatment of Blacks within traffic stops by law enforcement agencies outline the evidence of racial profiling. Research based upon the [critical race theory](#), indicates that law enforcement decisions in relation to a variety of functions, including traffic stops and arrests, as well as the interpretation of policies and the use of discretion, are subject to ingrained societal norms – which includes racism. This is often reflected in reports provided by law enforcement agencies in which whites, relative to other racial categories, are less likely to experience traffic stops, arrests, etc.

There is also research related to the [minority threat hypothesis](#), which argues that social control measures, such as arrests or the use of force, are disproportionately used towards minorities who

represent populations that are increasing in certain geographical areas. The increase of minorities represents a potential threat to the status quo within society, especially among whites who are comprised of the dominant class. In many cases Blacks are stereotypically associated with criminality and violence which results in both actual and perceived fear among whites. Due to such fears, it is not uncommon for whites to concentrate their collective and political efforts (via law enforcement) by utilizing unreasonable crime control efforts towards minority groups.

## Solutions

A number of solutions exist in response to racial profiling. They include measures associated with legislation, training, and law enforcement agency policies.

**Legislative** – State government could pass a variety of laws, including those that require the reporting of law enforcement decisions (i.e., traffic stops or arrests) which may [mitigate the extent of racial disparities](#). It may also point to the need for additional policies and training among specific law enforcement agencies as well as local city government officials. Studies also suggest that the passage of laws that explicitly outlaw the use of racial profiling may serve as a deterrent among institutions who either engage in racial discrimination or fail to address the existence of such.

**Individual Police Bias** – In some cases, the actions of an individual may not necessarily reflect the collective intent, practices, and organizational culture of an institution. To that end, law enforcement agencies can employ measures designed to decrease the likelihood of bad apples by 1) screening for bias among potential law enforcement officers, 2) testing for evidence of bias such as the [Implicit Association Test](#), an assessment which determines the association of good with whites and bad with Blacks, and 3) training in which law enforcement are exposed to what is referred to as counter stereotypical content. This includes the process of associating that which is considered good with Black and bad with white. Despite the immediate positive results, this approach has yet to offer any long-term benefits. To that end, it might be considered as supplement along with other remedial measures.

**Policies** – Under certain conditions, individual acts of discrimination may actually reflect the existence of institutional discrimination. This is often the case when administrative personnel fail to consider the possibility of such. As a remedy, law enforcement agencies can adopt measures that can mitigate the existence and impact of racial profiling. This includes 1) limiting officer discretion in the use of a body camera, 2) the adoption and measurement of racial impact statements, 3) the adequate punishment of officers who consistently engage in acts of discrimination, and 4) the adoption of a law enforcement approach which [prioritizes the treatment of citizenry](#) (referred to as procedural justice) as opposed to an exclusive approach based upon metrics, arrests, and crime fighting activities (i.e., distributive justice).

The adoption of these solutions, particularly in combination, could help mitigate the far-reaching implications and consequences of racial profiling and encourage a more equitable form of policing in communities.