

Topic Page: [Racial profiling in law enforcement](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/racial_profiling_inLaw_enforcement)

Definition: **racial profiling** from *Dictionary of Politics and Government*

the practice by some police of stopping and questioning members of specific ethnic groups more often than others without reasonable cause

Summary Article: **Racial Profiling**

From *Encyclopedia of Social Problems*

Racial profiling is the increased scrutiny or selective enforcement of rules, norms, and laws for members of specific social groups. The increased scrutiny or selective enforcement results in the increased likelihood that these racial groups will experience significantly higher levels of negative sanctions than would be expected given their numbers in the population. The cumulative effect of these higher levels gives the impression that these groups are more prone to deviance than other groups. Such selective rule enforcement has led some to associate a culture of poverty or deviance with the group. Racial profiling, a more subtle form of racism, occurs in many countries besides the United States, including England, France, Japan, Germany, Mexico, Russia, Sudan, and Zimbabwe.

Evidence of this systematic singling out of racial and ethnic non-elites for differentially negative sanctions exists throughout the United States. While most recent research and concern focus on police and crime, a well-documented, long history of racial profiling exists. Sustained efforts, led by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), resulted in the initiation of multiple lawsuits, passage of a series of laws, and numerous policy changes. Unfortunately, as long as racial profiling is treated as a problem and not a symptom, few actual remedies will be forthcoming. To treat racial profiling as the problem, much like smokers' cough, is to treat the symptoms. Racial profiling is part of a larger, more ingrained problem in Western culture.

In the raging debate over racial profiling, it should be understood that most Americans, both racial elites and non-elites, agree that racism is bad, that vestiges of racism yet remain, and that laws and their enforcement should be racially neutral. The degree to which groups and individuals assess such neutrality is dependent upon which side of the racial divide they find themselves. As in the 1995 O. J. Simpson trial, many racial elites view the criminal justice system as fair, while many racial non-elites view the same system as being unfair. Most racial non-elites know with certainty that police, the courts, and the laws unfairly target, systematically restrict, and regularly harm members of their groups. Alternatively, most racial elites know with certainty that their only protection from an increasingly hostile and criminal underclass is the police, the courts, and the laws.

Although several factors may account for these differences, the force of the news media cannot be ignored. Evidence seems to support the vilification of racial non-elites. Specifically, blacks and Hispanics are more likely to be presented as criminals than as victims or more positively. These types of perceptual biases have dire and negative consequences when racial non-elites confront the legal system. Thus both blacks and Hispanics are more likely to be stopped, searched, and charged with trivial offenses simply because they are members of racialized non-elites.

These types of observations are not limited to the United States but rather are universally associated with racial and ethnic discrimination. For example, research conducted in South Africa documents how

racial elites inflate their own superiority by deflating that of racial non-elites. Consequently, while they perceive themselves as superior, they describe racial non-elites as greedy, lazy, sexually aggressive, deviant, disrespectful, irresponsible, dependent, and backward. Further, as seen in Russia, when racial elites also dominate the police, these types of attitudes can result in selective enforcement, extremism, and ethnic intolerance.

Globally, since September 11, 2001, a fear of immigrants and anti-immigrant hostilities has increased. Xenophobic fears have surfaced in Belgium, Denmark, England, France, Italy, and the Netherlands, to name but a few. Xenophobic fears in the United States since 9/11 have led police, customs, and other entities to target Arabs and Muslims, particularly men, at airports and other ports of entry, under the presumption that they pose a threat to national security.

Within organizational culture, specific code words reflect racial profiling. Important promotions and recommendations for hire are often couched in terms that on the surface seem innocent, but in reality reflect the racial bias of the dominant group. Often, the parties involved suggest that they are reflecting the “best interests” of the company and the individual, when they say that one candidate is “ready” for a “stretch” while another might be more “risky.” Often, the candidates suggested as encompassing the most risk are also the racial non-elite, with whom the racial elite feels the most uncomfortable.

Racial profiling in hiring can be more complex. That is to say, managers (regardless of race) often are more likely to hire whites than blacks. Further, non-black managers (i.e., Asian, white, and Hispanic) tend to hire significantly fewer blacks than do black managers. While the researchers note larger racial gaps in the South, all regions and store types reflect these patterns. Racial profiling also negatively affects black and Hispanic welfare recipients in their attempts to secure viable jobs. White workers benefit most from welfare-to-work programs, suburban location of employer, and higher skills or salary thresholds. Alternatively, minority-owned or governmental subsidies tend to erase some of these differentials for both black and Hispanic workers. Racial non-elites may also be more critically scrutinized for promotions than their white counterparts. By implication, a presumption of guilt or incompetence exists with regard to racial non-elites and one of innocence or competence with regard to racial elites. The constant battle to prove oneself worthy of credit, employment, housing, admissions, promotions, and so on represents a constant struggle for legitimacy.

In retail, security officials and store personnel also may employ racial profiling, as they are more likely to concentrate on the race of their customers than their conduct. Within these establishments, racial non-elites are targeted and therefore may be more likely to be caught. Therefore, “shopping while black,” another form of racial profiling, may lead to the increased likelihood of blacks being caught, while the failure to monitor whites will give the impression that whites are less likely to commit the same crimes. Some store security personnel use codes to signal that a black, Asian, or Hispanic has entered the store. When, for example, one hears “Code 3,” store personnel have instructions to monitor suspects of particular racial or demographic groups.

Racial profiling, regardless of form, continues to stigmatize, restrict, and further marginalize group members. Consequently, what seems on the surface to be random or coincidental in actuality preserves racial hierarchies.

See also

Further Readings

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