

profiling, many state and local law enforcement agencies have been mandated or have volunteered to collect traffic stop data to monitor the behavior of officers to determine the extent of such profiling. However, to actually determine if racial minorities such as African Americans are stopped for an infraction like speeding more than whites, researchers would first have to determine the percentage of African American drivers relative to whites who were actually driving along a given highway, and then the percentage of these motorists who were actually speeding, to get a true base rate of speeding per population group. This would entail many hours of monitoring a given highway during various times of day. While some researchers have actually collected these data, Williams and Stahl decided to examine whether race was a determining factor in whether a driver was searched, not in the original police stop. The questions they asked were, “Who is being searched, and what are the results of these searches?” Using data collected in 24 local Kentucky law enforcement agencies along with two state agencies, they concluded that of the motorists pulled over on the interstate for compliance and courtesy stops, African American and Hispanic motorists were significantly more likely to be searched compared to white motorists. To test the second question, they examined whether there were differences in positive search results (e.g., finding contraband) across race or ethnic groups. Consistent with other research, there was no statistical difference in the likelihood that white, African American, or Hispanic motorists who were searched actually had illegal material.

To better contextualize these quantitative findings, Williams and Stahl (2008) conducted focus groups with police officers to determine their perceptions about a number of issues, including whether traffic stops and searches were effective in preventing some of the problems in their communities. A purposive sample of 24 officers participated in five focus groups. After comparing the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences across groups and individual officers, several themes emerged. The first was that drug use and sales as well as drunk driving were major community problems. The second was that the police perception was that if you wanted to target a particular problem, you had to target a particular group: African Americans were perceived to be associated with crack cocaine, driving under the influence was perceived to be associated with Hispanic motorists, and methamphetamine was perceived to be associated with whites. Moreover, officers were confident that traffic stops helped deter the drug trade and improve the quality of life of their local communities. Williams and Stahl concluded that the officers shared a perception that they were community problem solvers who profile the problems and not a particular group. However, these qualitative data, combined with the quantitative analysis of search data, led the researchers to conclude, “If police want to be efficient and effective in their efforts to stop drugs, it seems that they need to disregard the ‘profile,’ as our analysis has found that it is an ineffective tool for turning up illegal substances” (p. 238). This triangulation of methods was extremely helpful in placing the quantitative data within the perceptions shared by police officers.

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