

## Studying Racial Profiling in North Carolina

*NIJ Research in Progress Seminar, "Studying Racial Disparity in Traffic Stops and Outcomes: Lessons Learned in North Carolina," Matthew T. Zingraff, William R. Smith, and Donald Tomaskovic-Devey, grant number 99-MU-CX-0022, available on videotape from NCJRS (NCJ 188064).*

Racial profiling by law enforcement officials in traffic stops can lead to bias and disparity in arrests, searches, citations, and other interventions. It may also lead to increased distrust of police.

A study by researchers from North Carolina State University found a small degree of racial disparity in the actions of the North Carolina State Highway Patrol and a higher level of distrust of police among African-American drivers. The preliminary findings were presented at a Research in Progress seminar at NIJ. The complete findings will address individual and organizational practices, the racial composition of drivers on specific roads, differences in driving behavior, and variations in other factors correlated with driving behavior.

### Sources of Data

The researchers used two data sets. The first set included North Carolina State Highway Patrol data on citations, written warnings, and search files for 1998 and 2000, as well as "stop" records for 2000. Additional data were collected by the researchers from focus groups, a telephone survey of 1,500 white and 1,500 African-American licensed drivers in North Carolina, and on-road observations. These additional data were used to gauge the extent of driving violations, independent of official police records.

### Findings

**Who gets stopped and why.** The telephone survey found that the people who were stopped more often drove more miles per year, reported more speeding and risky driving behaviors, and expressed a greater desire to avoid getting speeding tickets. Specifically, drivers stopped most often were younger drivers, drivers in older cars, and African Americans. However, African-American

drivers reported that the highway patrol stopped them less often than did officers from other law enforcement agencies.

More African Americans than whites reported that officers gave them a discretionary reason for stopping them. African-American drivers also related more disrespect on the part of the officer during the stop than did white drivers. Both African-American and white drivers reported a similar distribution of citations and written and verbal warnings.

**Officer bias.** In focus groups conducted by the researchers, some officers indicated that cognitive bias—the perception of race or ethnicity as a reason for a person’s behavior—does not affect their behavior. Some officers said that they know whether they will write a citation, issue a written warning, or give a verbal warning before they know who is driving.

Other officers said they decide what action to take based on the circumstances of the stop, including the demeanor of the driver. For these officers, cognitive bias is possible.

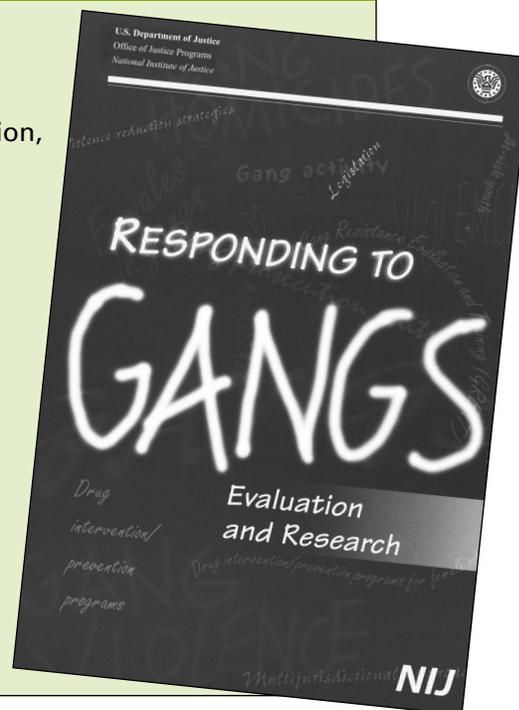
**Level of trust.** To measure trust in the police, respondents were asked to rank their trust on a scale of one to five, with one representing a belief that police are always fair and five representing a belief that police are never fair. The average for African-American respondents was 2.53, while the average for white respondents was 1.89. Respondents cited negative stop experiences, a belief that racial profiling exists, and a general distrust of government as reasons for their lack of trust of the police.

**Patterns in traffic stops.** To gather on-road observations, the researchers selected 14 four-lane highway segments

## *Responding to Gangs: Evaluation and Research* Presents the Findings of a Decade of Study on Youth Gangs

This compendium of NIJ-sponsored research, edited by Winifred L. Reed and Scott H. Decker, contains 10 chapters of evaluations of intervention, prevention, and suppression methods. Programs addressed include Boston’s Operation Ceasefire; the middle-school-based G.R.E.A.T.; and the JUDGE program, a multijurisdictional task force in San Diego.

*Responding to Gangs: Evaluation and Research* (NCJ 190351) can be downloaded from the NIJ Web site at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/pubs-sum/190351.htm>. Print copies are available through NCJRS at <http://www.puborder.ncjrs.org>, 1-800-851-3420 (TTY toll free 1-877-712-9279).



## Ideas Welcome

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of 10–15 miles in length. These road segments were located in areas with a substantial number of highway patrol stops and a significant presence of African Americans. Researchers traveled the 14 highway segments for approximately 24 hours over several weekdays, recording the speed and demographic characteristics of the drivers.

Across the 14 highway segments, the percentage of those stopped for speeding who were African American was highly correlated with the percentage of drivers who were African American and were observed speeding ( $r=.91$ ). The researchers found a pattern for speeding stops along the highway segments and a bias against African Americans. In 12 of the 14 highway segments, officers stopped more African Americans than non-African

Americans. However, in only 2 of the 12 sites was the difference statistically significant.

The researchers explained that the results from the on-road observations can be generalized to the same highway in the same county. However, different highways in the same county may yield different results, suggesting limits to generalizing to other highways.

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### For more information

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