

Are Minorities More Likely To Be Stopped By Police?

By Amanda Alvarado

“My thoughts in the moment were, ‘I can’t believe this is happening right now. We did nothing wrong,’” says Sunny Sylvester, a black woman, as she speaks about an encounter she and her boyfriend had with a police officer.

Sylvester was in the car with her boyfriend one day. She turned out of her neighborhood and found herself in front of a police car. Soon after, she was pulled over and things escalated quickly. Sylvester asked why she was pulled over, but the officers refused to answer. Sylvester and her boyfriend were asked to get out of the car so it could be searched. Her boyfriend was handcuffed. As this was happening, her boyfriend mentioned that he was interning at the public defender’s office at Atlanta Municipal Court in Atlanta, Georgia. Right after this, the officers took the handcuffs off him and gave Sylvester her ID. Finally, the officers told her the reason she was pulled over: going a little fast around a curve. Sylvester left with a warning.

Before this incident, Sylvester says, “I was someone who believed that there was something that the person could've done to prevent being mistreated and put in handcuffs, or that maybe they actually did do something wrong. I wasn't naive to the fact that some police officers racially-profile people, but in the back of my mind, I always wondered if it was something they could've done to prevent this ill-treatment.”

Now, she has a different mindset when it comes to police officers and racial profiling. “My mind has been changed drastically since this event. I understand now that sometimes a person doesn’t have to actually commit a crime for them to treat you like a criminal. All it takes is you being in a place at the wrong time for this to happen. Unfortunately, minorities are a huge target in this country. This is the very reason we should continue to share and tell stories like mine,” says Sylvester.

Sylvester and her boyfriend are not alone. Research shows that [many](#) individuals have been racially-profiled by law enforcement, with black and Hispanic drivers being searched [four times](#) more often than white drivers. Officers are more likely to stop black drivers for [no discernible](#) reason. Minorities are more likely than whites to be more distrusting of law enforcement and more frequently report that the police single them out because of their race or ethnicity. Racial profiling is also ineffective and it alienates communities from law enforcement and causes law enforcement to [lose credibility](#) among those they are to protect and serve.

[Federal guidelines](#) on law enforcement decisions, including traffic stops, states that race, ethnicity, and national origin are among the characteristics that officers are not to rely on. Racial profiling is unconstitutional, violating its promises of equal protection under the law to all and freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures; however, it has been a troubling national problem for quite some time.

Elizabeth Epsy, the director of public affairs for the Atlanta Police Department in Atlanta, Georgia, says that while research shows that minority groups are more often stopped than whites, there is an explanation for this. “These numbers are totally affected by the geographical area in which the majority of crime take place. More crime means more cops. More cops equal more stops. Urban communities tend to have slightly more crime. It’s important to look at the crimes versus the race. For example, when it comes to minorities and Caucasians and heroin use, officers consistently stop more Caucasians,” says Epsy.

In Sylvester’s story, the officers did not tell her why she was pulled over until after they allowed her to leave. However, that is not part of the guidelines set forth by the Atlanta Police Department. Epsy says that, “officers are to be safe, courteous and explain the lawful justification for the stop. If warranted, an officer can arrest or issue a citation. However, the officer has some discretion on whether to arrest or not.”

Sylvester's boyfriend was handcuffed while the officers searched her car and a Stanford [study](#) of law enforcement practices in Oakland, California, found that officers were using handcuffs on black individuals much more than white individuals.

In recent years, minority groups, especially black individuals, and their confrontations with police, have been in the news quite more often. From Eric Gardner to Michael Brown to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, the tensions between law enforcement and minority groups have come to light. Epsy says that the growing media attention on racial profiling and law enforcement has "had little impact on the way officers perform their duties in a physical sense as it relates to their activities on the street. Officers are trained to be professional, exercise good judgment, follow the standards and rules established by their department and the constitution of the United States. Officers still honor their oaths, but it has led to more transparency in the manner in which we report to the public our activities."