CRJS/SOC 451

Research Paper

Police Targeting Black Americans

 Haven Habhab

**Abstract**

The paper will discuss the inequalities in the policing system. Focusing on police targeting Black Americans through traffic stops and looking for drugs.

**Introduction**

I chose the topic of police targeting Black Americans because I find it extremely interesting to study. I think it is very unfair that one race is treated differently than the other. It is essential to study the inequalities in the criminal justice system. Knowledge is essential to help prevent a repeat in history. Police targeting is common in racially biased traffic stops and looking for drugs.

Further research will help police departments realize where the inequalities are most present so that departments can create policies and training to decrease these specifics. Additionally, it is essential to execute successful research and be able to teach it to everyone. The majority of criminological theories emphasize the importance of teaching critical race theory and other inequalities so that society can learn from past mistakes.

Historically, the system has been set up against Black Americans. Policies like environmental racism, the war on drugs, and the National Housing Act of 1934 contributed to this. Environmental racism is when the trash dumps are placed next to minority communities, leading to the leakage of lead, creating lead poisoning. It also made the neighborhoods look rundown by placing garbage beside them. The appearance of a neighborhood does play a factor in crime rates. The war on drugs is when the police targeted minority communities for crack instead of looking for cocaine. This is because in the minority communities, they used crack, and in the wealthy communities, they used cocaine. It was a way to put the minority communities in jail. The National Housing Act of 1934 created redlining. This is when the banks would not give out mortgages or loans to communities surrounded by red lines. The minority communities were marked with red lines around their neighborhoods. This prevented the neighborhoods from receiving financial help and prospering. They ended up receiving less resources. Police Targeting is dependent on the function of society and the government. Discrimination acts set up the police to target minorities because they are just going off of the current state of society.

**Literature Review**

**Traffic stop disparities and statistics**

There is a term called driving while black. This term references Black Americans getting pulled over because of their race. This tends to use one, and there can be no reasoning seen for the traffic stop except for stereotyping. It is not just all talk; statistically, this is proven, “This research compares stops by local police to those by the highway patrol in North Carolina in 2000. Generally, we find a fairly large race disparity in local police officer stops, and a very small one in highway patrol stops” (Warren et al., 2006, p. 731). From my own experience, this is very common. I worked at a police department in Texas, and as I was riding with the cop, she was actively looking to pull people over for drugs or guns. We pulled over 11 people that day, and all 11 were minorities. While she mentioned anything about stereotyping, there is something called unconscious bias. This is when our past experiences in how we grew up affect how we process things and think of people. It might not even be intentional, but because of how some people grew up, they could see minorities as more dangerous and criminals. This plays a massive factor in driving while black.

**Police conducting searches**

Another huge issue is the racial disparities in police conducting searches. This could be police conducting searches by people walking by that fit the description or police conducting searches on traffic stops, from my experience working at police departments. Some cops had this mindset of searching for drugs. They did this by legally pulling over suspicious-looking people for issues like a wide right turn or failure to stop before the stop sign. These are things that almost everyone tends to do, but the police can still get anyone for illegally. However, the “suspicious-looking” people tend to be minorities. While, they tend to not write tickets for this. Their main goal is to try to search someone’s car. Once they pull someone over and tell them why, they ask if they have any weapons or drugs on there. Most people say no, but some people do say yes. After someone says no, the police ask if they can search the vehicle. Many people do not know their rights, so they consent to it. This can create many qualities in police conducting searches.

When minorities tend to get pulled over more, they also tend to get asked to search them more. Research shows the statistics, “Black Californians are more than twice as likely to be searched as white Californians, at about 20 percent versus 8 percent of all stops” (Lofstrom et al., 2021). This is such a big difference, and what makes it worse is that Black Americans do not even make up 15% of the population, while white people make up around 60%. The percentage of black Californians to be pulled over is almost more than twice as likely as that of white Californians while having a smaller race population is terrible. It singles out where the inequalities are.

**Percentage of Black Americans locked up for drugs**.

This is also another category where there are severe inequalities. More minorities are being charged with drugs and serving a prison sentence than white people. However, the white race is more persistent with drug usage, “In the 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, about 17 million white people and 4 million African Americans reported having used an illicit drug within the last month” (NAACP, 2021). This is a massive difference in numbers. In 2015, 13 million more white people used drugs. However, the sentencing does not show that “Almost 80 percent of people serving time for a federal drug offense are black or Latino. In state prisons, people of color make up 60 percent of those serving time for drug charges” (Pearl, 2018). While White Americans use drugs by more than 50% compared to Black Americans, Black Americans make up more than 50% of the sentences for drugs. A lot of the reasoning for this is racial disparities through traffic stops and searches. History also plays a huge part. Systemic issues also play a factor in this. For example, President Nixon created the “war on drugs.” This gave a lot of minorities drug sentences, “100:1 drug quantity ratio promotes unwarranted disparities based on race. Because of its relatively low cost, crack cocaine is more accessible to poor Americans, many of whom are African Americans. Conversely, powder cocaine is much more expensive and tends to be used by more affluent White Americans. Nationwide statistics compiled by the Sentencing Commission reveal that African Americans are more likely to be convicted of crack cocaine offenses” (Vagins & McCurdy, 2006, p. i). When initiatives like this are set in place they create stereotypes that are hard to get rid of over time. The only way to eliminate this inequality is to educate society on the past and its lasting effects.

**Conclusion**

From this research paper, I learned about the inequalities in policing toward Black Americans. Through statistics, I better understood the extent of the stereotypes. I will use this knowledge to carry over into my future career and help hold people accountable. I will also help educate people on the inequalities present. I already knew a lot of this information, so researching the topic helped me better understand and develop a more diverse perspective. I will be a part of the change.

There are not necessarily policies in the policing system that need to change because we have already done much reform. The main emphasis in the policing system is to continue to hold people accountable. This is something that we have started and need to continue to improve on. What needs to change is society. Police are humans, and if they grew up around stereotypes and systemic racism this can influence their decisions. Something that I am disappointed in is the attempt to remove critical race theory from the education system. Critical race theory needs to be taught in school to help decrease crime rates, promote equality and unity, and limit stereotypes. I know the Trump administration is trying to get rid of critical race theory. I am concerned about this aspect in the future. I hope we can continue to push past this and become educated as a society. I am not extremely hopeful since I strongly believe it needs to be taught in schools. However, this is something that is out of some people’s control, and society needs to continue to educate people regardless.

**References**

Berger-Hill, D. (2025). *The Impact of Race and Ethnicity on the Criminal and Juvenile Justice Systems.* (Preliminary Edition). Cognella Academic Publishers. San Diego

Lofstrom, M., Hayes, J., Martin, B., & Premkumar, D. (2021, October). *Racial Disparities in Law Enforcement Stops*. Public Policy Institute of California. <https://www.ppic.org/publication/racial-disparities-in-law-enforcement-stops/>

NAACP. (2021, May 24). *Criminal justice fact sheet*. Naacp.org; NAACP. <https://naacp.org/resources/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>

Pearl, B. (2018, June 27). *Ending the War on Drugs: By the Numbers*. Center for American Progress. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/ending-war-drugs-numbers/

Vagins, D., & McCurdy, J. (2006, October 26). *Cracks in the System: 20 Years of the Unjust Federal Crack Cocaine Law*. American Civil Liberties Union. https://www.aclu.org/documents/cracks-system-20-years-unjust-federal-crack-cocaine-law

Warren, P., Tomaskovic-Devey, D., Smith, W., Zingraff, M., & Mason, M. (2006). Driving While Black: Bias Processes and Racial Disparity in Police Stops. *Criminology*, *44*(3), 709–738. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.2006.00061.x