

## 6. The New Face of Racism: Racial Profiling, 1999

Robert L. Wilkins, a Harvard-educated Washington attorney, was traveling along Interstate 68 a few years ago, returning from his grandfather's funeral, when a Maryland state trooper pulled the family's rented Cadillac over for speeding. When the trooper asked to search the car and its contents, Wilkins refused. But the trooper set loose a drug-sniffing dog to comb the car's exterior, including the windshield, the hubcaps, and the taillights. No drugs were found. Says Wilkins: "We were completely humiliated."

Wilkins is among hundreds of American motorists who claim to be victims of "racial profiling," the police practice of stopping and searching African-American and Hispanic drivers at rates far disproportionate to their numbers on the road.

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Angie Cannon, "DWB: Driving While Black," *U.S. News & World Report*, March 15, 1999, p. 72. Copyright 1999, U.S. News & World Report, Inc. Visit us at our web site at [www.usnews.com](http://www.usnews.com) for additional information.

"Driving while black," as the phenomenon has come to be known, flared anew last week when New Jersey Gov. Christine Todd Whitman fired the state police superintendent, Carl Williams, for saying that while he did not condone racial profiling, minorities were responsible for most of the country's illegal drug trade. The Williams incident gave momentum to a grassroots campaign by civil rights groups to make minority motorists more aware of their rights.

Statistics on racial profiling are controversial, but in a recent study, Temple University Prof. John Lamberth determined that about 75 percent of the motorists and traffic violators along one stretch of Interstate 95 were white, but 80 percent of searches were of minorities.

*Grateful Dead.* Anecdotal evidence of racial profiling has been accumulating for years. Prominent African-Americans, including actors Blair Underwood and Wesley Snipes and former Los Angeles District Attorney Christopher Darden, have been stopped by police, allegedly for no other reason than the color of their skin. Even white youths with long hair, beards, or Grateful Dead stickers are targeted, lawyers say.

Police insist they don't engage in profiling, but Williams, in the remarks that got him fired, cited disproportionately high drug arrests for minorities. While blacks comprise only about 13 percent of the population, statistics show they make up 35 percent of all drug arrests and 55 percent of all drug convictions. Nevertheless, civil rights advocates say Williams's remarks reflect a pattern of stereotyping by police. When police look for minorities, critics say, it is minorities they will arrest.

Increasingly, targets of racial profiling are challenging the practice in court—and winning. Sgt. David Smith, an Indiana state trooper, won a legal settlement from the Carmel, Ind., police department after he was pulled over while driving an unmarked car. Wilkins, the Washington lawyer, won \$95,000 from the Maryland State Police, as well as an agreement by the agency to keep records to help prevent discrimination.

On the national level, the American Civil Liberties Union and other grassroots groups, such as Citizens Opposing Profiled Police Stops, are pushing for legislation that would require the federal government to study traffic stops and to note the race and ethnicity of motorists detained. In the meantime, they are soliciting motorists' complaints. You can call COPPS at (757) 624-6620 or visit its Web site ([www.copps.org](http://www.copps.org)).