

African American police officers are concerned about the racial profiling of communities of color by their own agencies.

*In the wake of the many tragic police shootings of young African-American men in recent years, racial profiling by police has emerged as a significant issue within communities of color. But how is this perceived by African-American police officers? In new survey research **Lieutenant Charles P. Wilson**, **Shirley A. Wilson**, and **Malane Thou** find that a majority of these officers believe that racial profiling not only exists, but that it is condoned by agency supervisors. They also find that these officers feel that their presence was important when dealing with communities of color. They argue that the service of African American police officers has tremendous value, both to the agencies that employ them and to the citizens of their communities.*



Racial profiling, as a practice or policy, has seemed to be a significant issue in nearly every police-citizen encounter within communities of color, both large and small. From **Ferguson, MO** to **Baltimore, MD**; from **North Charlestown, SC** to **Cleveland, OH** – this singular issue has played a strong part in the interactions between police and minority community members for decades. Yet while this practice has been well documented in larger metropolitan areas, little is known of its impact in the smaller agencies that make up the bulk of the nation's law enforcement establishment. And even less is known regarding how African American police officers serving in these agencies perceive the effects of this practice.



Men and women of color have been employed in the professional ranks of the criminal justice system for more than two centuries, and have played an important and pivotal role in the way justice for all is dispensed. How they view themselves and their profession as a part of that process provides insight into the impact that role has on the profession itself. In new research, we examined perceptions of racial profiling by African-American officers in their own police agency. We find that a large majority felt that this profiling occurred and was condoned by agency administrators.



In an online survey of selected members of the **National Association of Black Law Enforcement Officers**, a non-profit organization representing the issues and concerns of officers of color, 144 officers were asked (with 102 replying) to express their opinion on three basic issues:

1. *Do you feel that racial profiling or police misconduct is practiced by persons within your agency?*
2. *Do you feel racial profiling or police misconduct is condoned by your agency?*
3. *Do you feel that your presence has a significant impact on the manner in which your agency deals with the minority community?*

Perceptions of Racial Profiling

A principal concern of this study was to determine whether African American officers' believed that racial profiling either occurred or was condoned within their agencies. While female officers were unanimous in their perceptions on both issues, 89.3 percent of male officers expressed that they believed racial profiling occurred, with 64.3 percent indicating that they believed it was actually condoned by supervisors and agency administrators. In total, 91.2 percent of all respondents felt that racial profiling occurred within their agencies, while 70.6 percent felt that it was actively condoned. This in turn would seem to validate the concerns and beliefs expressed by many residents in communities of color.



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Perceived Community Worth

How these officers viewed their worth to the community was an additional concern, as their perceived standing in both majority and minority communities has a direct effect on the manner in which justice is envisioned.

While only 52.9 percent of respondents responded that they felt they were well received in those communities where Whites were in the majority, 93.1 percent indicated that their worth as law enforcement officers was well recognized in communities of color, thus giving rise to the importance of agency diversification in recruiting, promotion and retention of minority personnel.

The results of this study, while not generalizable because of the small sample size, should likely be considered when agencies assess their various value systems and the perceptions of those who are tasked to interact with the citizens of their communities, as the manner in which they interact with members of the minority community will have a correlated effect on the overall concepts related to community policing. And the perceptions of those African American officers who serve in these agencies may have a more telling and chilling effect on community perceptions of police accountability and their perceptions of the justice system as a whole.

It is clear that the presence and service of African American police officers has tremendous value, both to the agencies that employ them and the citizens of their communities. Their pivotal and vital role in the dispensing of justice and social order has made them strategic players in the criminal justice system, whose importance cannot be lightly overlooked. Simply because their numbers in the profession are small, being seen as having little political interest, value and support, and thus less social capital than their White counterparts, should not be an excuse to put aside their concerns and beliefs of the systems effectiveness.

It is also clear that the practice of racial profiling, whether by design, omission, personal bias, or failures in policy or procedures, affects the lifblood of communities of color in near epidemic proportions, in both large and small jurisdictions. We unfortunately live in an unbalanced and somewhat imperfect world, filled with abstract individual perceptions of race, ethnicity, power and social structure. And the issues of race and police-community relations have now become a significant factor where smaller law enforcement agencies are concerned.

If, as the founders of our nation believed, the concepts of equal justice for all are to be fully realized, the practice of bias-based policing must find its just and well-deserved demise.

Policy statements that are supported both top-down and bottom-up; increased supervisory oversight; enforced and enhanced training for all police staff in such areas as cultural sensitivity and the ethical approaches to community

policing; systemic change in agency core values; improved efforts and methodologies in communications with targeted communities; and the systemic and systematic elimination of perceived stereotypes and unconscious biases that exist due to differential exposure and illusory correlation mechanisms, all will serve to eradicate these practices. When the associations now presumed between race and criminality are removed and cease to have a compelling interest, it will become quite clear that bias-based policing serves no true purpose.

This article is based on the paper "[Perceptions of African American Police Officers on Racial Profiling in Small Agencies](#)" in the *Journal of Black Studies*.

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