

CHAPTER 14

The Color of Suspicion

JEFFREY GOLDBERG

Sgt. Mike Lewis of the Maryland State Police is a bullnecked, megaphone-voiced, highly caffeinated drug warrior who, on this shiny May morning outside of Annapolis, is conceding defeat. The drug war is over, the good guys have lost and he has been cast as a racist. "This is the end, buddy," he says. "I can read the writing on the wall." Lewis is driving his unmarked Crown Victoria down the fast lane of Route 50, looking for bad guys. The back of his neck is burnt by the sun, and he wears his hair flat and short under his regulation Stetson.

"They're going to let the N.A.A.C.P. tell us how to do traffic stops," he says. "That's what's happening. There may be a few troopers who make stops solely based on race, but this—they're going to let these people tell us how to run our department. I say, to hell with it all. I don't care if the drugs go through. I don't."

He does, of course. Mike Lewis was born to seize crack. He grew up in Salisbury, on the Eastern Shore—Jimmy Buffett country—and he watched his friends become stoners and acid freaks. Not his scene. He buzz-cut his hair away and joined the state troopers when he was 19. He's a star, the hard-charger who made one of the nation's largest seizures of crack cocaine out on Route 13. He's a national expert on hidden compartments. He can tell if a man's lying, he says, by watching the pulsing of the carotid artery in his neck. He can smell crack cocaine inside a closed automobile. He's a human drug dog, a walking polygraph machine. "I have the unique ability to distinguish between a law-abiding citizen and an up-to-no-good person," he says. "Black or white." All these skills, though, he's ready to chuck. The lawsuits accusing the Maryland State Police of harassing black drivers, the public excoriation—and most of all, the Governor of New Jersey saying that her state police profiled drivers based on race, and were wrong to do so—have twisted him up inside. "Three of my men have put in for transfers," he says. "My wife wants me to get out. I'm depressed."

What depresses Mike Lewis is that he believes he is in possession of a truth polite society is too cowardly to accept. He says that when someone tells this particular truth, his head is handed to him. "The superintendent of the New Jersey State Police told the truth and he got fired for it," Lewis says.

This is what Carl Williams said, fueling a national debate about racial profiling in law enforcement: "Today, with this drug problem, the drug problem is cocaine or marijuana. It is most likely a minority group that's involved with that." Gov. Christine Todd Whitman fired Williams, and the news ricocheted through police departments everywhere, especially those, like the Maryland State Police, already accused of racial profiling—the stopping and searching of blacks because they are black.

The way cops perceive blacks—and how those perceptions shape and misshape crime fighting—is now the most charged racial issue in America. The systematic harassment of black drivers in New Jersey, the shooting of Amadou Diallo, an unarmed African immigrant, by New York City police officers earlier this year, and other incidents in other states have brought the relationship between blacks and cops to a level of seemingly irreversible toxicity.

Neither side understands the other. The innocent black man, jacked-up and humiliated during a stop-and-frisk or a pretext car stop, asks: Whatever happened to the Fourth Amendment? It is no wonder, blacks say, that the police are so wildly mistrusted.

And then there's the cop, who says: Why shouldn't I look at race when I'm looking for crime? It is no state secret that blacks commit a disproportionate amount of crime, so "racial profiling" is simply good police work.

Mike Lewis wishes that all this talk of racial profiling would simply stop.

As we drive, Lewis watches a van come up on his right and pass him. A young black man is at the wheel, his left leg hanging out the window. The blood races up Lewis's face: "Look at that! That's a violation! You can't drive like that! But I'm not going to stop him. No, sir. If I do, he's just going to call me a racist."

Then Lewis notices that the van is a state government vehicle. "This is ridiculous," he says. Lewis hits his lights. The driver stops. Lewis issues him a warning and sends him on his way. The driver says nothing.

"He didn't call me a racist," Lewis says, pulling into traffic, "but I know what he was thinking." Lewis does not think of himself as a racist. "I know how to treat people," he says. "I've never had a complaint based on a race-based stop. I've got that supercharged knowledge of the Constitution that allows me to do this right."

In the old days, when he was patrolling the Eastern Shore, it was white people he arrested. "Ninety-five percent of my drug arrests were dirt-ball-type whites—marijuana, heroin, possession-weight. Then I moved to the highway, I start taking off two, three kilograms of coke, instead of two or three grams. Black guys. Suddenly I'm not the greatest trooper in the world. I'm a racist. I'm locking up blacks, but I can't help it."

His eyes gleam: "Ask me how many white people I've ever arrested for cocaine smuggling—ask me!"

I ask.

"None! Zero! I debrief hundreds of black smugglers, and I ask them, 'Why don't you hire white guys to deliver your drugs?' They just laugh at me. 'We ain't gonna trust our drugs with white boys.' That's what they say."

Mike Lewis's dream: "I dream at night about arresting white people for cocaine. I do. I try to think of innovative ways to arrest white males. But the reality is different."

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A big part of Lewis's reality is a black man named Keith Hill. Lewis killed Keith Hill three years ago. Hill was speeding down Route 13 when Lewis pulled him over. He approached the car, Hill rolled down the window and Lewis smelled burning marijuana. He ordered Hill out of the car, began to search him and came up with thousands of dollars of cash and packets of marijuana. Hill suddenly resisted. What flashed through Lewis's mind was his friend Edward Plank, a trooper killed by a coke runner on this same highway a few months before.

They fought, Hill knocking Lewis into a ravine. They wrestled, and Hill went for Lewis's gun. "We were in a clinch, just breathing heavy," Lewis recalls, "and I said, 'Man, it's just pot, it's not worth it.'" But Hill kept going for the gun, Lewis tells me. He couldn't get it, and ran. He looped through a housing development and back to his car. Hill gunned the engine just as Lewis got himself in front of the car. Lewis drew his weapon and fired, striking Hill twice in the chest.

Lewis speaks often of the shooting, and of Eddie Plank's death. One day, he collects for me old newspaper stories of trooper shootouts. I'm reading them when we pass two members of his interdiction squad parked on the median of Route 13. They've stopped two cars with New York license plates filled with young black men. "What's up?" Lewis asks Gary Bromwell, a bulky, sullen trooper.

The two cars were pulled over for speeding and weaving, but that was a pretext. The goal of Lewis's unit, the criminal-interdiction unit, is to find drugs, guns and untaxed cigarettes in the cars of smugglers. However, in order to stop a suspected gunrunner or drug mule, troopers first have to find a reason in the state's traffic laws.

Bromwell issues written warnings and sends them on their way. I ask Bromwell, who is white, why he didn't ask the young men their consent to search the cars. Reasonable suspicion—anything the trooper can articulate before a judge—is enough to justify a consent search. "They're decent people," Bromwell says.

How can you tell?

"They looked me in the eye, and the driver's hand didn't shake when he handed me his license—"

Lewis interrupts: "No visible sign of contraband, no overwhelming odor of air fresheners emanating from the vehicle, no signs of hard driving"—that is, driving long hours without making stops. He is listing Drug Enforcement Administration-endorsed indicators of drug smuggling. Smugglers use air fresheners to fool drug-sniffing dogs. Signs of hard driving—"these guys drive straight through because they don't want to leave their drugs alone," Lewis says—include loose-fitting clothing, day-old beards and food wrappers on the floor. These signs, though, can also indicate the presence of college students—which is, in fact, the case here.

Did you stop them because they were black men from New York? I ask.

"Tell you the truth," Bromwell says, "we couldn't see who was driving these cars. They were speeding."

After the New York cars pull into traffic, Lewis shows Bromwell and his partner, Rob Penny, the newspaper clippings, hoping they will back him up. "Eddie Plank," he says. "Killed by a black male. My shooting—a black. Robbie Bishop, down in Georgia, killed by a black. North Carolina trooper, killed by a black."

Bromwell looks uneasy. I ask him if he believes in a connection between the race of the shooters and the crimes they commit.

"People might think it," Bromwell says, walking away, "but they don't say it." He flashes Lewis a look that says, Shut up, and quick.

WHY A COP PROFILES

This is what a cop might tell you in a moment of reckless candor: in crime fighting, race matters. When asked, most cops will declare themselves color blind. But watch them on the job for several months, and get them talking about the way policing is really done, and the truth will emerge, the truth being that cops, white and black, profile. Here's why, they say. African-Americans commit a disproportionate percentage of the types of crimes that draw the attention of the police. Blacks make up 12 percent of the population, but accounted for 58 percent of all carjackers between 1992 and 1996. (Whites accounted for 19 percent.) Victim surveys—and most victims of black criminals are black—indicate that blacks commit almost 50 percent of all robberies. Blacks and Hispanics are widely believed to be the blue-collar backbone of the country's heroin- and cocaine-distribution networks. Black males between the ages of 14 and 24 make up 1.1 percent of the country's population, yet commit more than 28 percent of its homicides. Reason, not racism, cops say, directs their attention.

Cops, white and black, know one other thing: they're not the only ones who profile. Civilians profile all the time—when they buy a house, or pick a school district, or walk down the street. Even civil rights leaders profile. "There is nothing more painful for me at this stage in my life," Jesse Jackson said several years ago, "than to walk down the street and hear footsteps and start thinking about robbery—and then look around and see somebody white and feel relieved." Jackson now says his quotation was "taken out of context." The context, he said, is that violence is the inevitable by-product of poor education and health care. But no amount of "context" matters when you fear that you are about to be mugged.

At a closed-door summit in Washington between police chiefs and black community leaders recently, the black chief of police of Charleston, S.C., Reuben Greenberg, argued that the problem facing black America is not racial profiling, but precisely the sort of black-on-black crime Jackson was talking about. "I told them that the greatest problem in the black community is the tolerance for high levels of criminality," he recalled. "Fifty percent of homicide victims are African-Americans. I asked what this meant about the value of life in this community."

The police chief in Los Angeles, Bernard Parks, who is black, argues that racial profiling is rooted in statistical reality, not racism. "It's not the fault of the police when they stop minority males or put them in jail," Parks told me. "It's the fault of the minority males for committing the crime. In my mind it is not a great revelation that if officers are looking for criminal activity, they're going to look at the kind of people who are listed on crime reports."

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Chief Parks defends vigorously the idea that police can legitimately factor in race when building a profile of a criminal suspect.

"We have an issue of violent crime against jewelry salespeople," Parks says. "The predominant suspects are Colombians. We don't find Mexican-Americans, or blacks or other immigrants. It's a collection of several hundred Colombians who commit this crime. If you see six in a car in front of the Jewelry Mart, and they're waiting and watching people with briefcases, should we play the percentages and follow them? It's common sense."

What if you follow the wrong Colombian, or track an Ecuadorean by mistake? "We're not using just race," he says. "It's got to be race, plus other indicators, so that won't happen."

I asked Parks to comment on the 3-out-of-10 hypothetical. In Maryland, the state police, as part of a settlement of an American Civil Liberties Union lawsuit, reported that on a particular stretch of highway, the police came up with drugs in 3 out of every 10 consent searches. This was deemed unacceptable by the A.C.L.U. "Three out of 10?" Parks said. "That would get you into the Hall of Fame. That's a success story." He continued: "At some point, someone figured out that the drugs are being delivered by males of this color driving these kinds of vehicles at this time of night. This isn't brain surgery. The profile didn't get invented for nothing."

PROFILING IN BLACK AND WHITE

"Some blacks, I just get the sense off them that they're wild," Mark Robinson says. "I mean, you can tell. I have what you might call a profile. I pull up alongside a car with black males in it. Something doesn't match—maybe the style of the car with the guys in it. I start talking to them, you know, 'nice car,' that kind of thing, and if it doesn't seem right, I say, 'All right, let's pull it over to the side,' and we go from there."

He is quiet and self-critical, and the words sat in his mouth a while before he let them out.

"I'm guilty of it, I guess."

Guilty of what?

"Racial profiling."

His partner, Gene Jones, says: "Mark is good at finding stolen cars on the street. Real good."

We are driving late one sticky Saturday night through the beat-down neighborhood of Logan, in the northern reaches of Philadelphia. The nighttime commerce is lively, lookouts holding down their corners, sellers ready to serve the addict traffic. It's a smorgasbord for the two plainclothes officers, but their attention is soon focused on a single cluster of people, four presumptive buyers who are hurrying inside a spot the officers know is hot with drugs.

The officers pull to the curb, slide out and duck behind a corner, watching the scene unfold. The suspects are wearing backward baseball caps and low-slung pants; the woman with them is dressed like a stripper.

"Is this racial profiling?" Jones asks. A cynical half-smile shows on his face.

The four buyers are white. Jones and Robinson are black, veterans of the street who know that white people in a black neighborhood will be stopped. Automatically. Faster than a Rastafarian in Scarsdale.

"No reason for them to be around here at this time of night, nope," Jones says.

Is it possible that they're visiting college friends? I ask.

Jones and Robinson, whose intuition is informed by experience, don't know quite what to make of my suggestion.

"It could be," Jones says, indulgently. "But, uhhhh, no way."

Are you going to stop them?

"I don't know what for yet, but I'm going to stop them."

The whites step out of the building, separate and dissolve into the night before Jones gets to make his stop. Jones is unhappy; he's proud of his tracking skills. "They're hard to see in the dark, I guess," he says, smiling.

So, race is a legitimate proxy for criminality?

"No," Jones says. Few cops ever answer yes at the outset. "But it depends. I mean, you're a cop. You know who's committing the crimes. It's your neighborhood. That's how it works."

Jones and Robinson are assigned to Philadelphia's 35th Police District, one of the more drug-ridden districts in a drug-ridden city. Certain sections of Philadelphia are still very much lawless. Last year, the city hired John Timoney, who served as first deputy commissioner under William Bratton in New York City, to revive a police department that had become tragically inept. Timoney, by all accounts, has done a remarkable job reforming the department, and letting the criminal underclass know that their actions will bring consequences.

But Philadelphia is not quite Rudolph Giuliani's New York. Jones and Robinson are surprised to hear, for instance, that the smoking of marijuana in public places is actively discouraged by New York police. They express this surprise after they try to clear a drug corner of young men who continue smoking fat blunts even after Robinson and Jones alert them to the fact that they are in the presence of law-enforcement officers.

"You know, the city is cracking down on marijuana smoking," Jones tells the men. They stub out their joints—but not before one man takes one last, deep drag—and move across the street.

Jones shakes his head and says, "It's like there aren't any laws out here."

Like many black cops, Jones and Robinson have more in common with their white colleagues than they do with, say, the Rev. Al Sharpton. "The problem with black politicians is that they think the cop is automatically guilty," Jones says.

One day, while driving through a particularly rank stretch of their police district, Jones decides that I should interview drug dealers on the subject of police harassment and racial profiling. The point he hopes to make is that the complaints of racial harassment are illegitimate. Jones approaches one group of dealers, heavy-lidded young men drinking 40-ounce bottles of malt liquor. One dealer, who gives his name as Si-Bee, is asked by Jones whether the police are harassing young blacks or simply enforcing the law.

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"Why can't I just sit on my corner?" Si-Bee says in response. "Unless you've got probable cause, you can't come and harass me." To which Jones replied: "Whoa. Probable cause. Big word."

"Cops come busting on us for no reason," a young man named Mustafa says. "It's just plain and simple harassment. Just messing with us."

"Which are worse?" Jones asks. "White cops or black cops?"

"Black," comes the reply, virtually in unison.

We return to the car, and Jones laughs: "That one," he says, pointing out the window, "I arrested for dealing. That one we got in a stolen car. That one, the one who wouldn't talk to me, I arrested two months ago. I'm going to court soon to testify against him."

We stop at another corner, another group of feckless youth. Same questions, same responses. I decide to switch subjects. Instead of talking about Philadelphia, I want to know what happens when they drive the New Jersey Turnpike.

"That's the worst," one young man says. "I never ride the turnpike."

I turn to Jones, waiting for a smirk.

It never comes.

"I'm going to have to agree with the brother on that one," he says.

What?

Jones, it turns out, is a staff sergeant in the New Jersey National Guard. "Yeah, when I go to Jersey for Guard weekends, I take the back roads," he says. "I won't get on the turnpike. I won't mess with those troopers."

"DRIVING WHILE BLACK," AND OTHER EXAGGERATIONS

Here's the heart of the matter, as Chief Greenberg of Charleston sees it: "You got white cops who are so dumb that they can't make a distinction between a middle-class black and an underclass black, between someone breaking the law and someone just walking down the street. Black cops too. The middle class says: 'Wait a minute. I've done everything right, I pushed all the right buttons, went to all the right schools, and they're jacking me up anyway.' That's how this starts."

So is racism or stupidity the root cause of racial profiling?

Governor Whitman, it seems, would rather vote for stupidity.

"You don't have to be racist to engage in racial profiling," she says. We are sitting in her office in the State House in Trenton. She still seems a bit astonished that her state has become the Mississippi of racial profiling.

Whitman, though burned by the behavior of her state troopers, is offering them a generous dispensation, given her definition of racial profiling. "Profiling means a police officer using cumulative knowledge and training to identify certain indicators of possible criminal activity," she told me. "Race may be one of those factors, but it cannot stand alone."

"Racial profiling," she continues, "is when race is the only factor. There's no other probable cause."

Her narrow, even myopic, definition suggests that only stone racists practice racial profiling. But the mere sight of black skin alone is not enough to spin most cops into a frenzy. "Police chiefs use that word 'solely' all the time, and it's such a red herring," says Randall Kennedy, Harvard Law professor and author of the book "Race, Crime and the Law." "Even Mark Fuhrman doesn't act solely on the basis of race."

The real question about racial profiling is this: Is it ever permissible for a law-enforcement officer to use race as one of even 5, or 10, or 20, indicators of possible criminality?

In other words, can the color of a man's skin help make him a criminal suspect?

Yes, Whitman says. She suggests she doesn't have a problem with the use of race as one of several proxies for potential criminality. "I look at Barry McCaffrey's Web site," she says, referring to the Clinton Administration's drug czar, "and it says certain ethnic groups are more likely to engage in drug smuggling."

It is true. Despite President Clinton's recent declaration that racial profiling is "morally indefensible," the Office of National Drug Control Policy's Web site helpfully lists which racial groups sell which drugs in different cities. In Denver, McCaffrey's Web site says, it is "minorities, Mexican nationals" who sell heroin. In Trenton, "crack dealers are predominantly African-American males, powdered cocaine dealers are predominantly Latino."

The link between racial minorities and drug selling is exactly what Whitman's former police superintendent, Carl Williams, was talking about. So was Williams wrong?

"His comments indicated a lack of sensitivity to the seriousness of the problem."

But was he wrong on the merits?

"If he said, 'You should never use this solely; race could be a partial indicator, taken in concert with other factors'—she pauses, sees the road down which she's heading, and puts it in reverse—"but you can't be that broad-brushed."

"Racial profiling," is a street term, not a textbook concept. No one teaches racial profiling. "Profiling," of course, is taught. It first came to the public's notice by way of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's behavioral-science unit, which developed the most famous criminal profile of all, one that did, in fact, have a racial component—the profile of serial killers as predominantly white, male loners.

It is the Drug Enforcement Administration, however, that is at the center of the racial-profiling controversy, accused of encouraging state law-enforcement officials to build profiles of drug couriers. The D.E.A., through its 15-year-old "Operation Pipeline," finances state training programs to interdict drugs on the highway. Civil rights leaders blame the department for the burst of race-based stops, but the D.E.A. says it discourages use of race as an indicator. "It's a fear of ours, that people will use race," says Greg Williams, the D.E.A.'s operations chief.

Cops use race because it's easy, says John Crew, the A.C.L.U.'s point man on racial profiling. "The D.E.A. says the best profile for drug interdiction is no profile," he says. "They say it's a mistake to look for a certain race of drivers. That's their public line. But privately, they say, 'God knows what these people from these state and local agencies do in the field.'"

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The A.C.L.U. sees an epidemic of race-based profiling. Anecdotes are plentiful, but hard numbers are scarce. Many police officials see the "racial profiling" crisis as hype. "Not to say that it doesn't happen, but it's clearly not as serious or widespread as the publicity suggests," says Chief Charles Ramsey of Washington. "I get so tired of hearing that 'Driving While Black' stuff. It's just used to the point where it has no meaning. I drive while black—I'm black. I sleep while black too. It's victimology. Black people commit traffic violations. What are we supposed to say? People get a free pass because they're black?"

HOW TO JACK UP A BLACK MAN: A PRIMER

"You know, the black people out here are different," Girolamo Renzulli says. He is formerly of New York, now serving as a Los Angeles County deputy sheriff. We are standing in the parking lot of the Lennox sheriff's station on the edge of South Central Los Angeles. Renzulli speaks in low tones.

"How so?"

"They're just, I don't know, different."

Like how?

"Wild," he says. "You'll see."

The Los Angeles Sheriff's Department does not look at black men differently than it looks at white men: it is heinous to even suggest it, the Sheriff himself, Leroy Baca, says. He has 8,000 sworn officers under his command; the Sheriff's Department polices unincorporated areas of Los Angeles County and 40 different towns.

"It's happened before," Baca will acknowledge. "When I was a lieutenant, I knew a deputy who stopped interracial couples. We removed him from the field, disciplined him and transferred him out."

Today, though, it just doesn't happen. Baca reads to me from his "Core Values" statement, which, among other items, promises that sheriff's deputies will have the "courage" to stand up to "racism, sexism, anti-Semitism and homophobia."

"Even criminals have dignity as human beings that must be honored," Baca says.

This is not necessarily an opinion shared by his men. Bobby Harris is a senior deputy at the Lennox station, who, with four other deputies, shot and killed one man this year, and, Harris says, "the year ain't over yet." Deputy Harris is not shy about sharing his position on profiling, which does not dovetail with Sheriff Baca's—at least as Baca described his position to me.

"Racial profiling is a tool we use, and don't let anyone say otherwise," Harris says. "Like up in the valley," he continues, referring to the San Fernando Valley, "I knew who all the crack sellers were—they look like Hispanics who should be cutting your lawn. They were driving cars like this one"—he points to an aging Chevy parked in the station's lot—"and all the cars had DARE stickers on them. That's just the way it is."

If it is unclear whether Sheriff Baca is sincerely oblivious to the goings-on at the Lennox station, many chiefs, I've found, are not terribly interested in knowing too much about the tactics their subordinates use to bring down the crime numbers—

crime reductions that, in this performance-driven era of policing, are key to job preservation. In Baltimore, for instance, rank-and-file officers know full well who a multi-agency drug interdiction team that operates at the city's train station is looking for.

"Everyone knows they're looking for 'Yo girls,'" says Craig Singleterry, a black Baltimore police officer. "Yo girls," Singleterry explains, are young black women with long nails and hair weaves who carry such accouterments as Fendi bags and who deliver drugs and money for dealers in New York.

"Of course we do racial profiling at the train station," says Gary McLhinney, the president of the Baltimore Fraternal Order of Police. "If 20 people get off the train and 19 are white guys in suits and one is a black female, guess who gets followed? If racial profiling is intuition and experience, I guess we all racial-profile."

Here is Baltimore's Police Commissioner, Thomas Frazier, on racial profiling: "To say that being of any particular race makes you a suspect in a particular type of crime is just wrong, and it's not done in Baltimore."

Roll call in Los Angeles, and the subject is an upcoming demonstration protesting the police killing last December of a 19-year-old woman in neighboring Riverside County. Tyisha Miller is the West Coast's Amadou Diallo. She was shot to death while slumped in her car with a gun on her lap. The police officers say they opened fire when she reached for the gun.

"I hear Al Sharpton is coming out for this," one deputy says.

"Can you believe it? They're going to turn this thing into another goddamn O.J.," another responds.

"And Jesse Jackson is coming."

"Oh, for Chrissakes."

All but two of the deputies are white. One is Hispanic, and he hangs with the whites. The other deputy is black, and he does not participate in the conversation. He instead stares at a fixed point on the wall in front of him. All of the white men in the room wear their hair in crew cuts. Many of them are ex-marines. Many also wear a tattoo of the Grim Reaper on their ankles. Deputies assigned to hard-core gang areas often tattoo themselves identically, very much like the gangs they fight. It is the white deputies who do this, in the main, and civil rights activists have loudly accused the Sheriff's Department of harboring racist gangs, identifiable by the tattoos they wear. Because of the criticism, deputies keep their tattoos a secret, even though they see nothing wrong with them. "If it was a picture of a black man hanging from a tree, I could see people getting upset," one deputy, Jeffrey Coates, told me.

Coates is perhaps the hardest-charging deputy at Lennox. He is a heavily muscled white man, a power lifter who usually wears a mustache but shaved it off for SWAT tryouts. SWAT culture frowns on facial hair.

The first time I met Coates, he was training a new deputy, a black woman named Angela Walton. Walton and Coates seemed to work well together. It can be unpleasant to be a black female deputy in Los Angeles, and Coates would rise to her defense. Once, he recalled, a suspect taunted Walton, saying, "I bet yo' training officer treats you real good."

"I wanted to shut up, just shut up. I am I a nigger?"

Coates was in Central. He also saw partner were shot; partner killed a man; Coates paid a fine. I felt. I said, 'I feel, I

"Afterward, the Coates said. "But if doesn't have much those who complain the black-on-black

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Coates spent one of the pretext stop—dope, or guns, or info to a vehicle," Coates

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"Now the reason tires," Coates said. "By rolling out of your ar

The men argued For what?

"Pet food."

"Pitbull?" Coates

"Two," one of th

"I wanted to beat his [expletive] face in," Coates remembered. "I told him to shut up, just shut up. Then he called me a nigger. I mean, what's that about? How am I a nigger?"

Coates was reared in Iowa, but he has an expert feel for the streets of South Central. He also seems to attract gunfire. Not long after I rode with him, he and his partner were shot at by a man with a revolver, who missed. Last year, Coates and a partner killed a man who opened fire on them from seven feet away. After the shooting, Coates paid a mandatory visit to the department psychiatrist. "He asked me how I felt. I said, 'I feel, [expletive] him.'"

"Afterward, the black newspaper wrote, 'Deputies kill another black man,'" Coates said. "But if this guy dumped me, they wouldn't have said anything." Coates doesn't have much patience for those who protest the killing of Tyisha Miller, or those who complain about racial profiling: "I say, get your own house in order. Stop the black-on-black homicide."

On one of the days we rode together, Coates and his partner for the day, Andy Ruiz, responded to a domestic call that involved an angry young black man with a tire iron. They pulled up just as the young man walked into the street. Coates grabbed the tire iron. Ruiz pulled out his 9-millimeter pistol. He later said, "I was ready to shoot him, really."

Inside the apartment the young man with the tire iron was trying to destroy, there were empty bottles of malt liquor on the television console. Coates: "You ever hear Chris Rock? He does this thing: 'Guy says, I got a job, man! Like he's proud. Well, [expletive], you supposed to have a job.'" This is an inexact recollection of a Chris Rock routine in which he delineates the differences between "blacks" and "niggers." Rock is very popular with white cops.

Coates spent one day giving me what might be called a master class in the art of the pretext stop—pulling over blacks and Hispanics, hoping to come up with dope, or guns, or information. "There's a law against almost everything as it relates to a vehicle," Coates said. Coates knows the law, and uses it.

For example, Coates spotted a type of car, a Monte Carlo, which is known to be favored by gangsters, moving along in traffic. He pulled in behind the car and studied it for a moment.

"No mud flaps," Coates said, turning on his lights.

They pulled the car over, and asked the three teenagers, shaven-headed Hispanics, to step outside. They patted them down and looked through the vehicle. The teenagers freely admitted to being members of the South Los gang.

"Now the reason we stopped you was that you have no mud flaps on your rear tires," Coates said. "But the real reason we stopped you is because we saw that you're rolling out of your area. Why don't you turn it around and go home."

The men argued: "We're just going to Costco."

For what?

"Pet food."

"Pitbull?" Coates asked.

"Two," one of the men answered.

Coates, same day, different vehicle, a purple Buick Regal with a bumper sticker that reads, "Don't you wish you were a pimp." Coates knows the owner of the car—he put him in jail. Behind the wheel is his wife. "There's got to be some violations on that car," Coates said.

There were two women in the car, smoking, and three very small children. Not one was in a car seat. "There's something hanging from your mirror, ma'am," Coates said, covering his bases. "Now, you've got to have the baby in a car seat, O.K.?"

The Regal pulled off, and Coates shook his head. "I should take her to jail just for the secondhand smoke," he said. "Smoking inside a car with little babies? Can you believe that? This place is crazy."

Coates doesn't believe that everyone in his patrol sector is guilty of something. He told me he believes that slightly less than half are guilty of something. He has a good hit rate—most of the drivers he stops are driving without licenses or registration.

But sometimes, in his sweep of the neighborhood, he makes a wrong call. One day, while patrolling with Walton on a bleak street of boarded-up bungalows and dead-eyed black men, he stopped a car without license plates. An obvious stop, but it's what happened after the car was stopped that warrants notice. Every male Coates stops he asks to step to the police cruiser and place his hands on the hood. Coates will then pat him down for a weapon.

The man driving this particular car acceded readily to this, but he was agitated. "This is my neighborhood," he said. He was a black man in his 30's. He seemed terribly embarrassed.

Coates knew something was off when the man produced his license, registration and insurance card, the trifecta of responsibility.

"I'm sorry. I was just taking the car from the garage back home," the man said. "I should have plates, you're right."

He explained why he was nervous: "I work at Northrop. I don't want anybody to see me like this." He had his palms flat on the hood of Coates's cruiser as he was talking. Walton was standing nearby, her hand near her weapon.

Coates dismissed him without writing a citation. The man thanked the deputy profusely, and took off.

It was a troubling moment, and I asked Coates if it's his policy to remove every male from any car he stops, no matter what the cause for the stop.

"Yes. Officer safety."

"Would you do that in a different part of the county?"

"I wouldn't do it in Santa Clarita," he said, pausing—realizing, perhaps, what that sounded like. "I mean, it all depends."

Do you recognize that you might have just created an enemy on this traffic stop?

"I was polite," he responded, "I always treat people with respect." This is true—he is generally respectful, even affable. But good manners do not necessarily neutralize humiliation.

As I was leaving, I asked Coates if he wore the Grim Reaper tattoo on his ankle.

"I haven't lied to you yet," he said. "So I'm going to have to take the Fifth on that one."

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The sheriff's station is an amusement park, it is geographically in the ghettos of South Central. The sheriff's deputies patrol the middle-class area known as Old

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PLAYING THE PERCENTAGES

The sheriff's station in Santa Clarita is located on a street named after a nearby amusement park, Magic Mountain. Santa Clarita is part of Los Angeles County, but it is geographically and culturally close to Simi Valley—and a world away from the ghettos of South Central. Not a lot happens out in Santa Clarita, which is why sheriff's deputies patrol in single-officer cars. Deputy Sam Soehnel is assigned to patrol the middle-class and white Valencia area, as well as the small, rundown Mexican section known as Old Newhall. Most of his problems are in Old Newhall.

"A lot of Hispanics are heavy drinkers," he says. "It's cultural." If pretext stops happen at all, they happen in Old Newhall.

A typical Saturday, a typical call. Someone has found a bank door ajar. Soehnel comes to talk to the semihysterical woman who discovered the open door. "Do you think someone is locked in the vault?" she asks. The manager comes, and closes up.

"People have very active imaginations here," Deputy Soehnel says.

Imaginations run wild, for instance, when residents see a black man or a Hispanic man someplace he "shouldn't be."

"If you're in a nice area," Soehnel explains, "and you see a Hispanic guy, he just sticks out, if he's just walking around, hanging out. People will call 911. If it's off a citizen's call, I can make contact with the individual. Ascertain what they're doing in the area."

I ask if it's his policy to pull people out of their cars during traffic stops.

"It depends. A nice area, a guy in Valencia, no. But if it's somebody you're not used to seeing, unfamiliar, yes. On this job, you learn that it's the nice guys that get killed."

Recently, there was a home-invasion robbery on his beat. A black suspect. "We get a lot of 911 calls," Soehnel says. "I got a call, 'There's a black guy walking around on people's lawns.' I get there, he's wearing an electric-company uniform. This woman sees a black guy walking on her lawn and goes ballistic."

Soehnel is sympathetic. To the woman.

"You play the percentages," he says. "That's the way it works. People see a black guy, they think: 'carjacker.'"

Or rapist.

GETTING PROFILED TO DEATH

"Amadou Diallo was profiled to death," says Ben Ward, New York City's first black police commissioner. The night Diallo was killed—the night Rudolph Giuliani's experiment in "zero tolerance" came to an end—the Street Crime Unit that fired the famous 41 shots was on the hunt for a black rapist.

Ward is no Sharptonite; he was one of the first black police officials to talk openly about what he called the "the dirty little secret" of black-on-black crime. Yet he believes, he says, that most police officers are spectacularly unqualified to discern the difference between lawbreakers and honest citizens.

"The demonstrable evidence shows that they stink at identifying criminals," he says, noting that the Street Crime Unit of the N.Y.P.D. reported that its officers stopped 45,000 people in 1997 and 1998, and arrested only 9,500.

The sociologist Jerome Skolnick once wrote that police officers keep in their minds a picture of the "symbolic assailant." In his work, Skolnick identified that "symbolic assailant" as a young black man.

It's not only white cops who keep that symbolic assailant in mind when they're out on patrol.

"Sometimes, I hate the young black males because of what they do to their community," Mark Buchanan, a black antigang officer in Boston, told me. "But then I think to myself, 'If this is the way I feel, and I'm black, what must white officers think about blacks?'"

I took this question to Mike Lewis, the Maryland state trooper who thinks often—very often—about race. We were driving through a black ghetto on the backside of Salisbury. It is, he says, a pit stop on the crack highway.

Has this job made you prejudiced? I ask.

He turned his head in surprise. It looked as if he wanted to say something, but nothing came out.

Finally, he says: "Let me tell you something. We respond to calls here, and let's say it's a domestic. We get there, 3, 4 in the morning, and the parents are cracked out, and the kids are up watching TV and eating popcorn, and the place is crawling with roaches. When I go home, the first thing I do is take a shower."

So are you prejudiced?

This is how he answers: "We arrested a Salisbury police sergeant a few months ago, for drugs. We knew he was involved with drugs. For years. He was black."

Black, black, black, black. It is what Mike Lewis sees. It is what Jeffrey Coates sees. It is tunnel vision. They understand half the equation—blacks commit more of certain types of crimes than whites. But what they don't understand is, just because blacks commit more crimes than whites doesn't mean that most blacks commit crimes.

"I see a 16-year-old white boy in a Benz, I think, 'Damn, that boy's daddy is rich.' I see a 16-year-old black, I think, 'That boy's slinging drugs,'" says Robert Richards, a black police sergeant in Baltimore who admits that tunnel vision is a hazard of the job. But like many black cops, he sees nuance where white cops see, well, black and white. "When I start thinking that way, I try to catch myself. If I'm walking down the street and I pass a black male, I realize that, chances are, he's not a criminal."

It is, in some respects, nearly impossible to sit in judgment of a Mike Lewis or a Jeffrey Coates. If Coates says he must pull black men out of their cars and search them on traffic stops, well, Coates has been shot at before, and most critics of the Sheriff's Department have not. But if Coates—and his department, by extension—believe that it is permissible to conduct pretext stops in South Central but impermissible to do so in Santa Clarita, then there's a problem.

The numbers cops cite to justify aggressive policing in black neighborhoods and on the highways tell only part of the story—an important part, but only part.

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For one thing, blacks make up only 13 percent of the country's illicit drug users, but 74 percent of people who are sentenced to prison for drug possession, according to David Cole, a law professor at Georgetown University and the author of "No Equal Justice."

Common sense, then, dictates that if the police conducted pretext stops on the campus of U.C.L.A. with the same frequency as they do in South Central, a lot of whites would be arrested for drug possession, too.

Of course, this doesn't happen, because no white community is going to let the police throw a net over its children.

WHAT GETS TALKED ABOUT, AND WHAT DOESN'T

Bob Mulholland is the sort of white cop who scares even white people. He is tall and thick and his eyes are hard. He works Philadelphia's 35th Police District with Gene Jones and Mark Robinson.

The three men meet up one afternoon on a drug corner.

Jones had been talking about the unequal application of the law. He is a mash of contradictions. One moment, he will speak of the need to "fry" black drug dealers. The next, he will talk about the absurd double standard in law enforcement—the way in which white drug users know with near 100-percent certainty that they will never go to jail for marijuana possession. How they know that they will never be jacked up during a pretext stop. How white cops cut white kids a break.

"We were doing a drunk-driving checkpoint one night," he said. "And I began to notice that when the cops caught a white kid drunk, they would say things like: 'I'm going to call your father. You're in big trouble.' With black guys, they'd just arrest them. Well, I mean, black kids got fathers, too."

Jones and Robinson like Mulholland. They told me he was fair. So I asked him if he ever sees a double standard in law enforcement, if the ghetto is policed one way and a white neighborhood another.

"My job is to clear this corner of [expletives]," he says. "That's what I do."

Do you ever cut anyone slack? Maybe a student who's waiting for a bus?

"My job is to clear this corner of [expletives]," he says, again.

But would you do that equally? If this wasn't the ghetto, but a university campus, would you clear the corner of white kids drinking beer?

"I don't give a [expletive] who's on the corner. My job is to clear the corner of [expletives]."

Jones and Robinson return to their car and sit in silence.

"Well," Jones says.

"That's what you call a back-in-the-day kind of attitude," Robinson says. The "day" being the time when white cops didn't have to worry about repercussions. I ask them if they believe Mulholland would in fact apply his corner-clearing skills with equal vigor in a white neighborhood.

"No," Jones says.

"No," Robinson says.

"Sometimes, white guys come from white neighborhoods to this job," Jones says. "They don't know a lot of black people, except what they see on TV. So they think they've got to act all hard. They get scared easy.

"Bob's a good guy, though," he continues. "He's a good cop. He's not a racist." Jones and Robinson are truly perplexed. White cops are impossible to understand sometimes. Sometimes they're your friends. And sometimes. . . .

"You won't believe this," Robinson tells me one day. "I got stopped."

Really?

"Yeah, in Abington." Abington is a white suburb over the Philadelphia city line. "It was weird. I was stopped at a light, and this police officer behind me puts his lights on, so I pull it to the side, thinking he's going to pass me. I was thinking like a cop. And then another car comes. The first cop comes over to my window and says he stopped me because my inspection sticker was placed abnormally high on the windshield."

Gene Jones begins to laugh.

"I thought they were going to pull out rulers," Robinson continues. "I mean, inspection sticker too high on the windshield?"

I ask Robinson what he was wearing. "What I've got on now," a denim shirt and a baseball cap.

"Then he sees the police emblem on my car, and he says, 'Oh, you're a cop?' I said, Yeah."

Why do you think he pulled you over in Abington? I ask.

"I don't know. Maybe because my car is kind of old."

He doesn't believe this even as he says it.

"Maybe it was that other thing," he continues. "The thing we were talking about."

Mark Robinson, the cop who profiles, was just profiled, and he can't even call it by name.

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