

The Problem of Ethnic Profiling in Europe

From street stops to airport searches, immigration sweeps to data-mining, ethnic profiling is widespread across Europe. The practice – whereby ethnic minorities are singled out for disproportionate police attention because of who they are or where they worship rather than what they have done – is evident in law enforcement organisations at every level and negatively affects the lives of millions of people. And there is no evidence that the practice actually works – no evidence that it lowers crime rates, prevents terrorism or reduces undocumented migration. Widely practiced with little scrutiny, ethnic profiling insidiously and wrongly suggests that discrimination is acceptable, and adversely impacts police-community relations. It is an ineffective practice which national and regional authorities must commit to eradicating.

Ethnic profiling defined

Ethnic profiling is the use by law enforcement officials of generalizations grounded in ethnicity, race, religion or national origin rather than objective evidence or individual behaviour as the basis for determining who has been or may be involved in criminal activity. It is the result of habitual, often subconscious, use of widely accepted negative stereotypes about who appears suspicious or who is more prone to commit certain types of crimes. It can also result from institutional policies targeting certain crimes or specific geographic areas without consideration for the disproportionate impact such policies can have on particular ethnic groups.

Ethnic profiling in practice

In Europe, ethnic minorities are stopped and searched far more frequently than their white European counterparts. In [Paris](#), for example, Blacks and Arabs are anywhere from two to 14 times more likely to be stopped than white Parisians. [Studies carried out in several Spanish cities](#) showed that immigrants, particularly Moroccans and Romanians, were far more likely to be stopped than Spaniards despite having much lower offending rates.

Much ethnic profiling takes place in the name of immigration control. Many European citizens and legal residents of minority ethnic origin are singled out for massive identity checks, raids, public transportation sweeps, and other immigration-related operations simply because of the colour of their skin, and not because of any appreciable evidence that they are undocumented migrants.

Regional and national efforts to prevent terrorism in the post-9/11 era [have relied on generalizations about Muslims and certain practices of Islam](#). Ethnic profiling is evident in massive identity checks of people in public places, raids on mosques, mining of public and private databases, surveillance activities, and “counter-radicalization” efforts.

The problem with ethnic profiling

Arguing that ethnic minorities are more likely to be involved in criminal activities, proponents of ethnic profiling claim that the practice is simply part of “good policing” and crime prevention.

This is simply not true.

Ethnic profiling is an inefficient allocation of already scarce law enforcement resources. When police treat an entire group of people as presumptively suspicious, they are likely to miss dangerous persons who do not fit the profile at the same time that they are targeting innocent people just because of what they look like or where they worship.

Ethnic profiling is also ineffective and counter-productive. In order for law enforcement agencies to be effective, people must have confidence that the police will act fairly and effectively within the law. People who are habitually stopped by the police—a humiliating and often traumatic experience—often lose confidence in law enforcement agencies. This lack of confidence reverberates through their family, friends, associates and communities, negatively impacting police-community relations and leading to decreased cooperation with law enforcement agencies.

Ethnic profiling violates a basic principle of human rights: that every person deserves equal treatment under the law. An illegal practice, it stigmatizes entire groups of people as criminals, potential terrorists and undocumented migrants, thereby legitimizing and reinforcing broader racial stereotypes.

Combating ethnic profiling

Since 2005, the Open Society Justice Initiative has worked with local, national and regional partners to combat ethnic profiling in Europe via documentation, capacity-building, technical assistance, and legal advocacy.

Documentation

The Justice Initiative conducts research and collaborates with national partners to generate both qualitative and quantitative documentation on ethnic profiling. These efforts have already yielded ground-breaking studies in [Bulgaria](#), Denmark, [Hungary](#), [France](#), Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, and [Spain](#) which for the first time have documented the prevalence, dimensions,

severity, impact and cost of ethnic profiling at the national and regional level. An important element of this documentation work is helping local civil society organizations develop an independent capacity to continuously monitor and document discriminatory policing practices.

Promoting Good Practice

The Justice Initiative has developed a toolkit for addressing ethnic profiling, which sets out a conceptual model of good practice and highlights successful examples from across Europe. Building upon the success of its [STEPSS \(Strategies for Effective Police Stop and Search\) project](#), the Justice Initiative works with national researchers, civil society organizations and law enforcement officials to monitor the use of stops, determine if they disproportionately affect minority groups, assess their efficacy in detecting and solving crime, and implement alternative policing practices.

Legal Advocacy

The Justice Initiative works to get European authorities to recognize and incorporate safeguards against ethnic profiling in its policies and legislation. It also supports domestic and international litigation efforts against ethnic profiling practices, including the landmark [Rosalind Williams v. Spain](#) case before the UN Human Rights Committee. That case marked the first time that an international tribunal ruled that ethnic profiling violated international human rights norms.

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