

**POLICE TRAFFIC STOPS  
AND RACIAL PROFILING**



# POLICE TRAFFIC STOPS AND RACIAL PROFILING

Resolving Management, Labor  
and Civil Rights Conflicts

*By*

**JAMES T. O'REILLY**

*University of Cincinnati College of Law  
Cincinnati, Ohio*



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*This book is dedicated to the memory of the late  
Jerry Casey, Chicago Police Department,  
with respect and appreciation.*



## PREFACE

Walking a straight line is a standard roadside test for possibly impaired drivers who are stopped by police. One who tries to discuss the controversial topic of police and racial profiling has a similar challenge: can I walk a straight and fact-based line through a controversial topic? The test is whether each reader can come away with some affirmative learning from the book's many parts. Because this text will be read by such divergent audiences as civil libertarians and veteran street cops, the text goes to lengths to balance the constitutional, statutory, policy and normative issues that make up this topic's coverage.

As a veteran labor arbitrator for police labor disputes, I was startled to find otherwise reasonable public officials respond to critics of the police with the glib comment that cops who select too many drivers of a certain race would be immediately fired for that offense. I realize the elected officials of a Midwestern city aren't always in tune with criteria applied in labor settings, but this promise to fire police officers without a bright-line standard of conduct was appalling. The more I looked into what the test for termination might be, the more I realized that the "offense" of driver selection statistics is fraught with definitional and policy problems. The educational efforts directed to elected officials, police managers and unions are a reflection of my experiences in this difficult field.

As a teacher in this field I learn from my students every semester, and I welcome readers to offer their feedback, dissent or constructive critiques to make subsequent editions of this text more useful to the reader. I appreciate the able assistance of Don Blair of the University of Cincinnati Law Library and Adam Breeden '02 for their capable research help.

Prof. James O'Reilly





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Comments and suggestions for future editions of this text are welcomed. The views expressed are those of the author (or of the source cited in footnoted materials) and no representation is made that the views reflect official policy of any institution or organization.

James T. O'Reilly



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**POLICE TRAFFIC STOPS  
AND RACIAL PROFILING**



**Part I**

**THE TRAFFIC STOP**



## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

Race-based selectivity of drivers who are stopped for questioning by police is a practice that unfortunately persists in some police agencies among some police officers. There is something wrong, something contrary to American beliefs, to the asserted presumptions that a Hispanic, Asian, African-American or Near Eastern background predisposes an individual driver to the behavior of a criminal. These racial attitudes are wrong on the facts, wrongly held as attitudes, and contrary to good police work under our Constitution and laws. Exceptionally qualified and experienced police managers have publicly and repeatedly disavowed the use of race as the sole reason why a traffic stop occurs.

“Racial profiling” should be dead as a police strategy and should be universally rejected as a tactical choice. Is that message clear and pervasive enough to reach all police officers and their supervisors? Can the message be accepted by the constituencies whom police serve, for whom traffic stops are a source of anxiety and concern? This is such a hot button political issue that writing a cooler, more analytical assessment has been a challenging task.

“Profiling” without regard to racial characteristics *should* continue, as an inherent part of training and daily life of the street-level law enforcement officer, because criminals whose behavior manifests similar external characteristics should be detected as efficiently as possible. The profile of an armed robber specializing in nighttime attacks on convenience stores is slowly developed over time, the product of many criminal behaviors observed and developed over a career-long experience. A profile is most useful at night; assume that it is 3:30 A.M, warm, dry and quiet. The cruising police car who passes a 24-hour convenience store can apply this kind of mental shortcut to the sight of a nervous teen or young adult, wearing a long raincoat and knit cap on a dry and warm night, looking frenetically in all directions as he walks toward the store’s door, his older model car parked on the side of the convenience store, out of the main lighted area, with the engine running and the lights out. You may select whatever racial component you wish; the profile