

# Black Iowans feel profiled by police

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Around 10:50 p.m. on a Friday in late April, 18-year-old John Hawkins Jr. and his younger brother, Joshua, were driving home after a rugby match when two Des Moines police officers pulled them over.

"Where are you going?" one officer asked the teens. "Where are you headed?" "Passenger, can I see some ID?"

The teens were questioned for about three minutes before being allowed to leave. They received no warning or citation and were not told why they were stopped.

But to John and Ronnie Hawkins, the boys' parents, the reason was obvious: The officers saw two black teenagers driving a nice-looking vehicle at night and assumed they were up to no good. Ronnie Hawkins filed a complaint with police.

Police officials, after review, reached a different conclusion.

They said the officers were investigating a rash of break-ins that involved a car similar to the one the teens were driving, and the stop was for a nonworking brake light. Because it was dark, the officers did not know the teens' race, officials said.

One traffic stop; two vastly different viewpoints.

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It's a clash of perspectives that exemplifies the chasm of mistrust between many black Iowans and the law officers paid to protect and serve the public.

That mistrust has been further fueled by the recent slayings of unarmed black men by white police officers in places like Ferguson, Mo.; New York City; North Charleston, S.C.; and Cincinnati, Ohio.

Iowa is among 32 states that do not require police to collect traffic stop data related to race. Only two Iowa police departments — Davenport and Iowa City — are known to formally analyze the data and share it with the public. That leaves scant empirical evidence to prove or disprove whether Iowa officers target drivers because of their race.

In those two cities, analyses by a St. Ambrose University professor show a disproportionate number of black drivers were stopped in comparison with whites. The studies also show black drivers were more likely than whites to be asked if their vehicles could be searched.

"Once police start looking at these things and thinking about it, it does open up a dialogue with the community," said Christopher Barnum, the St. Ambrose professor who has studied bias-based policing for more than a decade. St. Ambrose is in Davenport.



In researching the issue of racial profiling, The Des Moines Register interviewed 23 black Iowans. All but one — a black police officer — said they believe the state's law enforcement officers routinely single out minorities for questioning and use their authority as a method of intimidation.

Whether a 16-year-old new driver or a 65-year-old grandmother, they described encounters with law officers that evoked feelings of harassment and outright fear for their lives.

One of the people interviewed, Patrick Lewis of West Des Moines, said he has been stopped twice in the past 18 months because of the tint in his truck windows, even though the windows were rolled down both times. In the second encounter, an officer asked him to get out of his vehicle.

Lewis said he's apprehensive about what could happen during a police stop, even though he has done nothing wrong.

"That fear is always there," he said.

John and Ronnie Hawkins said they thought about telling their sons they couldn't drive at night, rather than risk another incident with police. But that solution was impractical, they said.

Still, Ronnie Hawkins worries when her sons are out at night.

"All I could think of is what if (my son) made the wrong move, if he reached for his license or something and the cop thought it was something else," she said of the night her sons were stopped.

"I never, ever want to be that mom on TV who is crying ... because something has happened to my son."

### **Few complaints about bias**

The Register also interviewed 13 members of Iowa law enforcement, who insist officers in their agencies do not make stops based on a driver's race or gender. If that were happening, they'd know about it, they said.

"We absolutely agree that there may be that perception in the community, and we want to dispel that," Des Moines Police Maj. Todd Dykstra said. "We also truly do not believe that (racial profiling) is occurring in the city of Des Moines."

Dykstra and other law enforcement leaders said their departments receive few complaints about racial profiling, and nearly all complaints are determined to be unfounded.

However, a racial profiling expert said complaints are not a good barometer to determine whether there's a problem.

"Citizens are either afraid of retaliation from police so they don't complain, or more often, they just believe nothing's going to happen, so why bother," said Jack McDevitt, director of the Institute on Race and Justice at Northeastern University in Boston, who has studied and written about racial profiling for the past two decades.

In the Des Moines area, members of the nonprofit community organization AMOS (A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy) have spent the past year recording the stories of black Iowans who believe they have been unfairly singled out because of their race by store clerks, security guards, police and others.

Retired Des Moines attorney Harvey Harrison, 71, said what he has heard through that process "proves racial profiling is still a problem, and it has to be dealt with to help this country."

Clive Police Officer Maurio Coleman, who is black, said as more police departments begin using body cameras, concerns about profiling may subside.

Too often, he said, people who are stopped are agitated or defensive.

Officers can defuse those situations by talking respectfully and being up front about why the stop was made, he said.

"As a black man, I don't have a distrust of law enforcement," Coleman said. "I understand how the job is, but I also understand that when people get scared, bad things happen."

Iowa police administrators and officers say minority drivers, just like other motorists, are stopped only when police believe a law has been broken.

Officials acknowledge, though, that pulling a driver over for what might be viewed as small infractions — a minor equipment violation or driving 5 miles over the speed limit — allows officers to check a vehicle and its passengers for other things, such as drugs and weapons.

They see such stops as a way to prevent a potential crime from being committed.

They also say that any data showing disproportionate numbers of black Iowans are involved in traffic stops simply indicates aggressive policing in high-crime areas.

"We realize there's a disparity in some neighborhoods of who gets stopped," said Daniel Trelka, Waterloo's public safety director. "You're seeing that disparity across the country, and it's not because the cops are a bunch of racists.

" ... Where are we seeing the violence? What neighborhoods are we seeing our shootings in?"

### **The push to collect data**

After the shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, President Barack Obama created the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. In May, the group released a report recommending that agencies adopt policies to clearly prohibit biased policing and also collect data regarding all police-citizen interactions.

"If you don't know something is going on, if you're not looking at the data, then you're not having those conversations with officers who might be misguided or are overstepping lines," said John Firman, director of the research division of the Virginia-based International Association of Chiefs of Police. "The perception that 'We're OK here' is not a good position to take."



Departments "don't want to invite this type of scrutiny," Glaser said. "If you don't collect the data, nobody can analyze it."

Still, some law enforcement administrators are beginning to realize "that they are in better shape in terms of public relations if they have the data, even if it doesn't look that great for them," he said.

A desire to improve relations with Iowa City residents is the main reason Police Chief Samuel Hargadine said he released his department's traffic stop data.

"There are those who are convinced we are profiling," Hargadine said. "We wanted to say one way or another whether it was occurring. If there's a problem, we wanted to address it."

### **A mother's fear persists**

Ronnie Hawkins isn't swayed by such assurances from police. She's the Des Moines mother who believes racial profiling triggered a traffic stop involving her sons, but the city deemed her complaint unfounded.

"I don't care what they say, my boys were targeted," she said.

She said the officers were traveling in the opposite direction of her sons' car and couldn't have noticed that a brake light was out before they made a U-turn to follow them.

In a letter from the city, police said the officers were simply returning to their patrol area.

Dykstra, a police commander, told the Register that officers were stopping vehicles that matched the description of a light-colored sedan believed to be connected with a rash of vehicle break-ins in the Beaverdale area.

Thirteen vehicles were stopped on April 24 in the same area as John Hawkins Jr., Dykstra said. Seven drivers were white; six were black, he said.

Police in July arrested one person suspected in the break-ins — a white 21-year-old woman. An arrest warrant also was issued for a white 50-year-old man, Dykstra said.

John Hawkins Jr. says he is now more aware that he's more likely to be pulled over by police than his friends who are white.

"I can't say, 'Oh, they're not going to pull me over,' because that's what I thought before," Hawkins said. "I was doing nothing wrong. ... We were just trying to get home, get a shower and go to sleep."

Ronnie Hawkins remains fearful for her sons' safety, feelings compounded by the nationwide tensions between black Americans and police.

"I'm always just aware that something could happen to my kids because this," she said, pointing to her skin, "is what they see first."

### **Racial profiling**

A standard definition of racial profiling does not exist, according to the International Association of Chiefs of Police, based in Arlington, Va. Different groups, such as attorneys, law enforcement and civil rights activists, have differing definitions.

However, the association, in a 2006 report, said racial profiling:

- Should not be considered the *sole* factor in a police action.
- Should not be the *primary* or *motivating* factor in a police action.
- Should not be a factor in a police action *except* in the manner that hair color, weight, or other physical descriptors are used in instances of identifying a suspect for a specific crime.