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The pushback against charges of racism in the State Police | Moran

Updated: Jul. 30, 2023, 6:43 a.m. | Published: Jul. 30, 2023, 6:31 a.m.



A study commissioned by the state itself found that State Police were more likely to stop Black and Latino drivers, and more likely to search them, even though searches of white drivers were more likely to yield evidence of a crime.



By [Tom Moran](#) | [Star-Ledger Editorial Board](#)

State Police Superintendent Patrick Callahan was on highway patrol as a young man when, by all accounts, the New Jersey State Police was a rogue agency that targeted Black drivers, especially on the

Turnpike, where [75 percent](#) of those arrested in 1999 were Black.

That led to a strict program of oversight by the federal Department of Justice that lasted 10 years, until a federal judge was convinced that the State Police had [turned a corner](#).

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But now, with Callahan in the driver's seat, a fresh report commissioned by the state itself found clear evidence that the State Police still stop Black and Latino drivers more often, search their vehicles more often, and arrest them more often – even though searches of cars driven by white motorists were [more likely to yield evidence of a crime](#).

To hammer the point home, researchers compared stops during the night and day. They found that minorities were significantly [more likely to be stopped during the day](#),

when their race might be more obvious.

So, is the force, which remains overwhelmingly white and male, still racist at its core? Are these disparities evidence of that?

Not so fast, says Callahan.

“It would be unfair and not accurate to point to disparities and attribute that to racial profiling,” he says. “What are the factors behind those disparities? That’s what I hope we’ll get from digging deeper into this.”

Attorney General Matt Platkin agrees. “The disparities are concerning, and we are committed to addressing them,” he says. “But the results have been mischaracterized. We do not have evidence of intentional bias. It’s not the same as it was in the 90’s. And anyone who says there’s been no progress is ignoring the great work that’s been done, across administrations.”



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It is more nuanced than it seems at first, experts say. Racial disparities can be aggravated by unwise police tactics, as they were in the 1990s when State Police used highway patrols to try to stop the drug trade, a practice encouraged by the federal Drug Enforcement Administration. It didn't work, and it gave bad cops a free hand to target minorities, since everyone is speeding to begin with.

“We dangled the carrot of Trooper of the Year on drug interdictions, like how many kilos you were able to get and how many guns,” Callahan says. “It became this chase. They called it ‘Noble Cause Corruption’ meaning the ends justified the means. That’s what brought about the federal intervention.”

That and a heavy dose of old-fashioned racism. Then as now, the hit-rate on white

drivers was higher, so even if you're looking for drugs, you can't justify targeting Black drivers. Read the [flood of pending discrimination lawsuits](#) from 16 minority, women and gay troopers, and the evidence of bigotry grows.

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Still, this is not all about hearts and minds. Criminal justice experts have found tons of evidence showing that bad tactics can widen racial disparities, like the earlier emphasis on drugs. The burning question now is whether State Police can identify practices that are aggravating these latest disparities and change them.

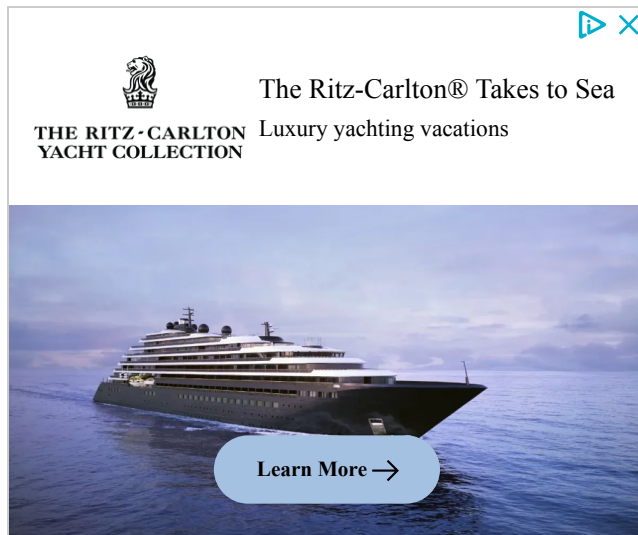
For example, should troopers pull cars over for minor violations, like broken taillights or overdue inspections? Or should they focus exclusively on dangerous driving, like

speeding and swerving, which might save lives and reduce racial disparities at the same time? Platkin says he wants to establish pilot programs to get answers to questions like that, and he's hired three criminal justice experts to design them.

"It's something we want to understand," he says. "If we can do things better, we all want to. And that's the biggest change since the 1990s."

One of the experts Platkin hired is Ken Barone at the University of Connecticut, who has advised police departments on racial profiling [for over a decade](#). Departments that focus on broken taillights, rather than safety, he said, are "much more likely to have racial and ethnic disparities."

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One town he advised, Newington, CT, had a policy of stopping cars on minor violations to search for drunk drivers. They focused on

areas of town with lots of bars, which happened to be minority neighborhoods, so the stops aggravated race relations and heightened disparities.

After 1,600 stops for things like broken taillights, the Newington Police found just [a single drunk driver](#). Focusing on minor violations in high-poverty areas deepened racial wounds, while proving entirely ineffective.

“What we’ve found in Connecticut is that when police look for an offense, they will find it, across racial groups,” Barone says. “But they tend to look for offenders in high-poverty areas at a higher rate.”

The frustration in the Black community over this is palpable. The Rev. Charles Boyer, a civil rights leader and pastor at Greater Mount Zion A.M.E. Church in Trenton, says the key to erasing disparities is to reduce police contact with Black and Latino citizens altogether. For the State Police, that means ignoring minor offenses.



“Drunk driving, and careless driving – yes, by all means, that’s an issue for the State Police” he says. “But not all the things that show no correlation to car accidents, like taillights, or running the license plates.”

Leaders of the state’s NAACP, in a letter signed by nine activists, are [pressing for a](#)




especially on hiring and promotions.

“It’s the entrenched racism that’s always been there,” says the Rev. Jethro James, pastor of Paradise Baptist Church. “They’re still the good ol’ boys. A bigot in camouflage is still a bigot,” he added, referring to the State Police uniform.

To me, denying that racism plays a role in these disparities is as blind as denying the real change that has occurred since federal supervision began in 1999.

For one, the disparities are not as stark now. The recent study found that [46 percent](#) of drivers stopped by State Police since the feds left in 2009 were Black or Latino, while those groups make up [37 percent](#) of the state's population.

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And State Police procedures have undeniably improved. Cruisers have cameras that turn on automatically when the lights are activated. All troopers wear body cams. The race and gender of every driver who is stopped is recorded, as is the race of the occupants.

If troopers want to conduct searches by consent, without a warrant, they must radio their barracks for permission, and wait for a higher officer to arrive and supervise. If data show a trooper stops disproportionate

numbers of Black or Latino drivers, that sets off an automatic review by supervisors. And all this data on stops, searches and arrests is [posted on the Attorney General's website](#).

A racist trooper simply does not have the same elbow room as before.

John Farmer Jr. was attorney general when the Whitman administration [finally admitted](#) that troopers were targeting Black drivers and agreed to federal oversight. Now the head of Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers, he says federal oversight was “a tremendous leap forward.”

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Granted, the job isn't done, and probably never will be. But at least systems are in place to keep the State Police in line.

If you want to fight racism among police in New Jersey, the bigger yield would likely be

in local departments. A handful of states require local cops to track this data as the State Police do today. But New Jersey is not among them.

“What would those disparities look like in towns that neighbor predominantly Black cities?” Boyer asks. “We can only imagine how much worse they would be.”

Platkin supervises all local departments, so he could order that. Let’s see if he does.

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