

Our final essay, by syndicated columnist Eugene Robinson, illustrates how an informative article for the general public can be based on data from a major research study—in this case a statistical report by the federal Bureau of Justice. At first glance, the study seems to indicate that no racial profiling occurs at the rate at which white, African-American, and Hispanic drivers are pulled over by police. But in this op-ed piece Robinson pushes deeper into the statistics and presents information showing that “driving while black” is “unsafe at any speed.”

Eugene Robinson

You Have the Right to Remain a Target of Racial Profiling

1 Washington—This just in: Driving while black is still unsafe at any speed, even
zero miles per hour. The same goes for driving while brown.

2 The federal Bureau of Justice Statistics released a report Sunday showing that
white, African-American and Hispanic drivers are equally likely to be pulled over by
police for an alleged traffic offense. In 2005, the year covered by the study, black
drivers were actually less likely—by a tiny margin—to be stopped by police than
drivers belonging to the other groups. You might be tempted to conclude that the
constitutional imperative of equal protection had finally been extended to America's
streets and highways.

3 But you would be wrong. The study reports that African-American and Hispanic
drivers who are stopped by police are more than twice as likely as whites to be
subjected to a search. Specifically, police searched only 3.6 percent of white drivers
pulled over in a traffic stop, while they searched 9.5 percent of African-Americans
who obeyed the flashing lights and 8.8 percent of Hispanics.

4 The report says the “apparent disparities” between racial groups “do not consti-
tute proof that police treat people differently along demographic lines,” since there
could be “countless other factors and circumstances” that go into the decision of
whom to spread-eagle on the hood.

5 All right, those figures alone might not constitute “proof” of bias that would
convince a jury beyond a reasonable doubt. They are pretty compelling, though, espe-
cially when you also consider that black and Hispanic drivers are much more likely to
experience “police use of force” than whites.

6 And besides, the following paragraph in the report pretty effectively demolishes
that “move along, folks, nothing to see here” disclaimer about bias:

7 “Police actions taken during a traffic stop were not uniform across racial and
ethnic categories. Black drivers (4.5 percent) were twice as likely as white drivers (2.1
percent) to be arrested during a traffic stop, while Hispanic drivers (6.5 percent) were
more likely than white (5.2 percent) or black (5.8 percent) drivers to receive a ticket.

8 “In addition, whites (9.7 percent) were more likely than Hispanics (5.9 percent) to
receive a written warning, while whites (18.6 percent) were more likely than blacks
(13.7 percent) to be verbally warned by police.”

9 African Americans have been putting up with the "driving while black" thing for so long that we've become somewhat cynical. For example, nearly three-quarters of whites and Hispanics who were pulled over for allegedly running a red light or a stop sign were willing to concede that they had been caught dead to rights, while nearly half of African Americans in that situation believed they had committed no infraction. About 90 percent of white drivers detained for some sort of vehicle defect, such as a busted tail-light, thought the stop was legitimate, as opposed to 67 percent of black drivers.

10 Think that's just paranoia? Then try to reconcile the counterintuitive fact that while blacks are much more likely than whites to be arrested in a traffic stop, they are also more likely to be released with no enforcement action, not even a warning. This looks to me like powerful evidence that racial profiling is alive and well. It suggests there was no good reason to stop those people.

11 "About one in 10 searches during a traffic stop uncovered evidence of a possible crime," the report says. What could be wrong with that? Isn't that what police should be doing—enforcing the nation's laws, capturing criminals, making law-abiding Americans that much safer?

12 Of course that's what we pay our police officers to do, but not selectively. Whites, too, drive around with drugs, illegal weapons, open containers of alcohol or other contraband in their cars. The numbers in the report suggest that if white drivers stopped by police were searched at the same rate as blacks or Hispanics, police would uncover evidence of tens of thousands of additional crimes each year, doubtless putting thousands of dangerous people behind bars.

13 But, of course, we don't want a society in which everybody is being patted down by police officers all the time. We don't want a society in which people have to stand by the side of the road, fuming, while police arbitrarily rummage through the stuff in their cars—shopping bags, children's toys, McDonald's wrappers—on the off chance of finding something illegal.

14 If you're black or brown, though, may I see your license and registration, please?

THINKING CRITICALLY

about "You Have the Right to Remain a Target of Racial Profiling"

1. Nationally syndicated African-American columnist Eugene Robinson highlights statistical data to support his thesis about subtle but pervasive racial discrimination. In doing so, he gives his report a "surprising-reversal structure." What is the common view, seemingly supported by the report, that Robinson believes is mistaken? What is his surprising view? How does he use report data to support his surprising view?
2. What pieces of information from the report do you find most compelling in supporting Robinson's thesis?
3. Analyze this piece from the perspectives of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

comp

For support in learning this chapter's content, follow this path in **MyCompLab**: Resources = Writing = Writing Purposes = Writing to Inform.

Identify the short story you plan to analyze and your main interpretive point.