

Who Do Police Serve and Protect?

In *Citizen-Protectors: The Everyday Politics of Guns in an Age of Decline*, Jennifer Carlson writes that people of color in the US are more likely to experience violent force, surveillance, or harassment by police than white people are. The tragic deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Trayvon Martin, and many others reconfirmed this finding.

However, what is happening to the Black community is indicative of a larger history. Following 9/11, the Transport Security Administration (TSA) increasingly questioned Arab and Muslim-looking passengers at airports. Police officers have continuously arrested people who have a South Asian or Middle Eastern appearance for “suspicious activity.” White people, on the other hand, tend to receive more positive treatment from the police. For example, Carlson, utilizing interviews with police and gun carriers, reports that police officers are much more likely to praise white open gun carriers as upstanding citizens while casting doubt on Black gun carriers. These incidences lead many experts to go beyond concerns about racial profiling in policing to question the de facto beneficiaries of law enforcement behavior in the US: whom do they serve and protect?

In the *UCLA Law Review Journal*, Brandon Hasbrouck argues that the police “continue to protect and serve the racial hierarchy blessed by the Constitution itself.” Similarly, James Baldwin, in 1966, stated that police have existed to “keep the Negro in his place and to protect white business interests.”

In the 1700s, formal policing in the US traced its root to the Southern states’ slave patrols which terrorized enslaved Blacks to deter revolts, capture and return escaped slaves, and discipline those who violated plantation rules. Slavery, indeed, had been constructed solely for the economic interest of white people. Meanwhile, in the Northern states, formal policing systems were established in the 1830s to protect whites from free Blacks who were deemed to be dangerous. In fact, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 labelled Black people as generally dangerous, thereby allowing slave catchers and police to surveillance and capture enslaved and free Blacks.

Centuries after slavery, racial subjugation in policing adopted a new form. In 2016, *Harper’s Magazine* reported that John Ehrlichman—Richard Nixon’s domestic-policy advisor—had asserted that Nixon benefited from the 1971 War on Drugs by associating Black people, whom he said to be Nixon’s political enemies, with heroin. Consequently, law enforcement agencies across the nation designated specialized units to target poor urban communities which are known for gangs, drugs, and violence. Most residents in these areas are racial minorities. In the following decades, police started to profile men who looked like stereotypical drug dealers—men of color who drove expensive cars and had pagers. Eventually, people of racial minorities were much more likely to be stopped on the street although they were rarely arrested.

In 1997, Congress passed the Traffic Stops Statistics Act, which compelled police to include race when reporting traffic stop-related data. This legislation highlighted the need to address the overpolicing/underpolicing paradox, which maintains that people of color are most likely to experience

inadequate protection from and unwanted attention by the police. Influenced by this reality, activists and policymakers began asking: what should be done to ensure that law enforcement officers actually serve a more diverse group of people in the population?

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Information gathered from Jennifer Carlson's *Citizen-Protectors: The Everyday Politics of Gun in an Age of Decline* (Oxford University Press, 2015); Dubosh, E. et. al.'s "Islamophobia and Law Enforcement in a Post 9/11 World" in *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, vol.3, no. 1, Fall 2015; Brandon Hasbrouck's "Abolishing Racist Policing With the Thirteenth Amendment" in *UCLA Law Review* 1108, 2020; James Baldwin's "A Report from Occupied Territory," *The Nation*, 1966; Dan Baum's "Legalize It All" in *Harper's Magazine*, 2016; ShaCanree Gowdy's "From Trayvon Martin to Breonna Taylor, other names besides George Floyd that make the case for Black Lives Matter" in *Chron*, June 3, 2020; and "Driving While Black: Racial Profiling on Our Nation's Highways," ACLU, (www.aclu.org).