DID THE *TIMES* SCAPEGOAT L.A.'S FINEST? (I)

Accusations of biased policing derail a stop-and-frisk campaign

For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Let's begin with a bit of self-plagiarism. Here's an extract from "Driven to Fail":

> As long as crime, poverty, race and ethnicity remain locked in their embrace, residents of our urban laboratories will disproportionately suffer the effects of even the best-intentioned "data-driven" [police] strategies, causing phenomenal levels of offense and imperiling the relationships on which humane and, yes, effective policing ultimately rests.

Our observation was prompted by public reaction to the collateral damage – the "false positives" – when specialized LAPD teams cranked up the heat in high-crime areas. Stripping away the management rhetoric, L.A.'s finest embarked on a stop-and-frisk campaign, and we know full well where those can lead. Facing a citizen revolt, LAPD promised to fine-tune things so that honest citizens would be far less likely to be stopped by suspicious, aggressive cops.

Well, that was in March. Seven months later, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that while the number of stops did go down, substantial inequities persisted. Among other things, blacks were being stopped at a rate far higher than their share of the population (27% v. 9%), while whites benefitted from the opposite tack (18% v. 28%). What's more, even though whites were *more* likely to be found with contraband, they were being searched substantially *less* often than Blacks and Latinos.

That, indeed, was the story's headline ("LAPD searches blacks and Latinos more. But they're less likely to have contraband than whites.") And the reaction was swift. Less than a week later, Chief Michel Moore announced that his specialized teams would stop with the stop-and-frisks and shift their emphasis to tracking down wanted persons:

> Is the antidote or the treatment itself causing more harm to trust than whatever small or incremental reduction you may be seeing in violence? And even though we're recovering hundreds more guns, and those firearms represent real weapons and dangers to a community, what are we doing to the tens of thousands of people that live in those communities and their perception of law enforcement?

To be sure, policing is an inherently "imprecise sport," and doing it vigorously has badly upset police-community relations elsewhere. Still, if the good chief wasn't just blowing (gun)smoke, foregoing the seizure of "hundreds" of guns might tangibly impact the lives of those "tens of thousands" who live in L.A.'s violence-plagued neighborhoods, and not for the better. (For an enlightening tour of these places check out "Location, Location, Location.")

To better assess LAPD's approach we turned – where else? – to numbers. California's "Racial and Identity Profiling Act of 2015" mandates that law enforcement agencies disseminate information on all stops, including every detention or search, traffic and otherwise, voluntary or not. For its reporting the *Times* analyzed LAPD stop data for the period of July 1, 2018 through April 30, 2019. It's available here.
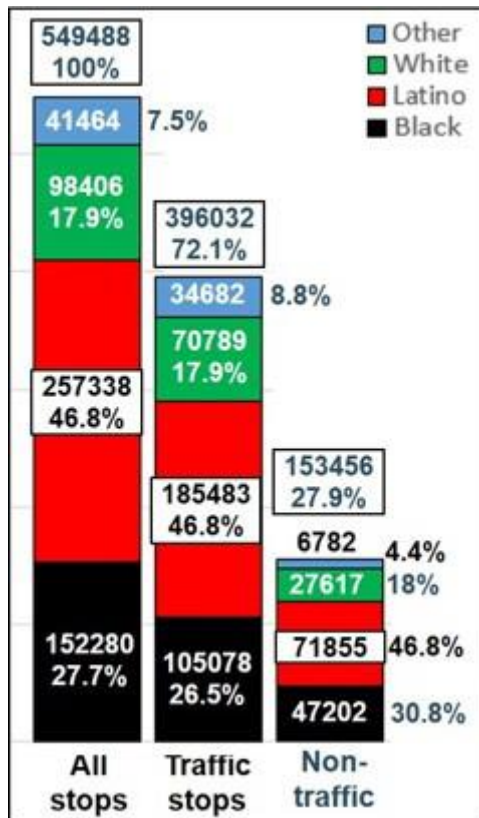
We downloaded the massive dataset and probed it using specialized statistical software. It contains 549,488 entries, one for each person whom officers proactively contacted during that ten-month period. (Actual stops were considerably fewer, as many involved multiple individuals.) About seventy-two percent (396,032) of those contacted were encountered during vehicle stops for traffic violations. The remaining 153,456 were detained outside a vehicle ("non-traffic stops".) Reasons included on-view offending (e.g. drinking, littering or smoking a joint), openly possessing contraband such as drugs or guns, behaving in a way that suggested the possession of contraband or commission of an offense, having an active warrant, or being a probationer or parolee of current interest.

Latest Census estimates peg L.A. City as 48.7 percent Hispanic/Latino. As the bar graph shows their share of stops came in at 46.8 percent, well in sync with that figure. Yet as the Times alarmingly noted, whites, who comprise 28.4 percent of the city's population, figured in just 18 percent of stops, while Blacks, whose share of the city's population is only 8.6 percent, accounted for a vastly disproportionate 28 percent of stops.

And there was the matter of searches, as well. We crunched the numbers and produced this graph. As the *Times* reported, only a measly five percent of traffic stops of whites led to a search. Meanwhile Latinos were searched in 16.1 percent of traffic stops, and Blacks in 23.3 percent. Yet searches of whites reportedly turned up loot more often.

|		All	Black	Latino	White
All stops	Contraband found	7.4%	9.1%	8.0%	5.3%
	Search	25.6%	33.2%	27.3%	15.2%
	Contraband found	20.7%	20.8%	20.1%	23.4%
	No search	74.4%	66.8%	72.7%	84.8%
	Contraband found	2.2%	3.3%	3.4%	2%
Traffic	Contraband found	3.1%	4.9%	3.2%	1.3%
	Search	15.0%	23.3%	16.1%	5%
	Contraband found	16.7%	17.2%	15.9%	20.1%
	No search	85.0%	76.7%	83.9%	95%
	Contraband found	0.7%	1.2%	0.8%	0.3%
Non-traffic	Contraband found	18.6%	18.5%	20.2%	15.3%
	Searched	52.8%	55.4%	56.1%	41.2%
	Contraband found	23.6%	24.1%	23.3%	24.5%
	No search	47.2%	44.6%	43.9%	58.8%
	Contraband found	12.9%	11.4%	16.2%	8.9%

Might whites, as the *Times* clearly suggests, be getting away with something?

As we discussed in "Driven to Fail," stop-and-frisks had for better or worse become LAPD's key tool in a campaign to tamp down violence. Specialized teams focused – albeit, not exclusively – on hot spots called "Laser" zones. A disproportionate number were in South and Central bureaus, the poorest and most severely crime-impacted areas of the city, predominantly populated by Hispanic/Latinos and Blacks.

Unfortunately, no stop location is given other than street address. Nor is there any information about crime rates or poverty levels. We set out to fill these gaps. To make the project doable we used statistical software to draw a random sample of one-hundred encounters. Given the dataset's huge size that's admittedly too few to adequately represent the whole. But it's a start.

Our sample includes one-hundred distinct individuals who were detained at one of ninety-nine unique stop locations. Seventy were stopped while in vehicles; thirty not. Overall, their race and ethnicity – 45% Hispanic/Latino, 32% Black, 16% white – came

pretty close to the corresponding distribution (46.8%, 27.7%, 17.9%) for the full dataset. So we feel fairly confident extending our findings to the whole.
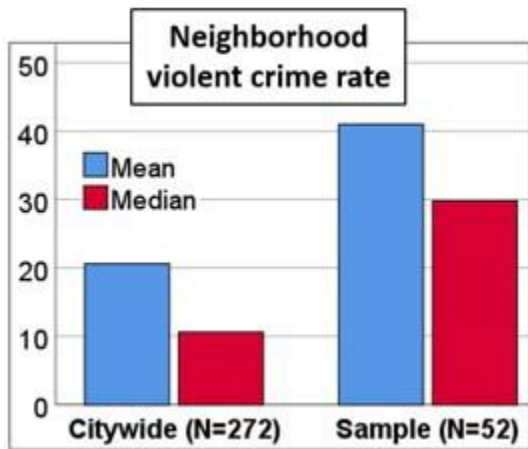

Let's talk about the sample. Using the *Times'* "Mapping L.A." utility, which tracks the city's 272 neighborhoods, we obtained violent crime data for the fifty-two neighborhoods that encompass the ninety-nine distinct street locations where citizens were stopped. It's apparent from the sample that LAPD targeted the city's more violent places. As the chart indicates, the mean violent crime rate of the sample's neighborhoods, 41, is twice the citywide rate of 20.6, while the sample's median rate, 29.8, is nearly three times the citywide 10.6. Violence rates in 36 of the sample's 52 neighborhoods exceed the citywide mean, and all but three exceed the citywide median.

Prior posts emphasize the centrality of neighborhoods. What about them might steer its inhabitants down the wrong path? Poverty – and what comes with being poor – are usually at the top of the list. We gathered racial/ethnic composition and poverty level data for each of the sample's fifty-two stop locations by entering their Zip code into the 2017 American Community Survey. (Incidentally, a quick way to get a Zip code is to type the street address into Google.) This graph displays the results:
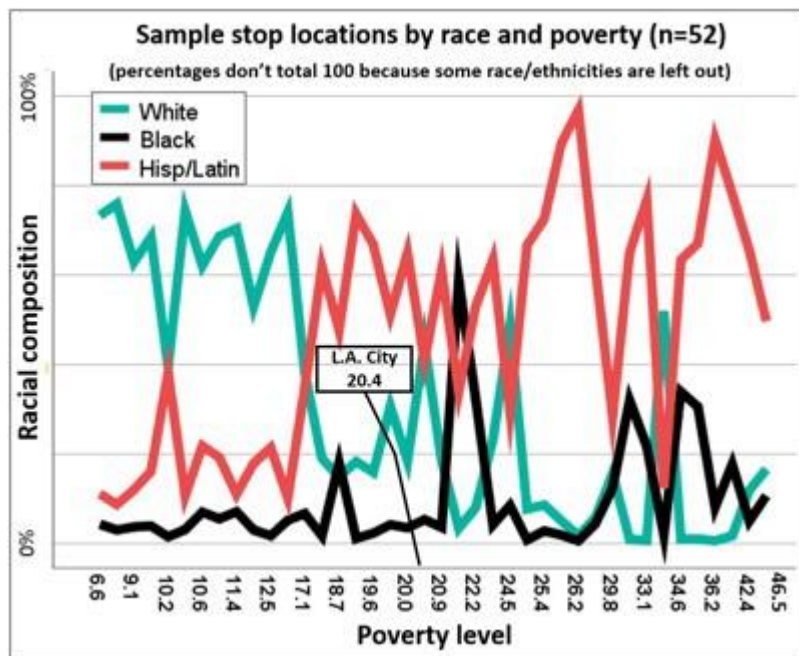

No surprise: whites predominate in most of the sample's economically better-off neighborhoods. As poverty rates increase (note the citywide mean of 20.4 percent) Hispanic/Latinos and Blacks come into the majority. Crime, as the below scattergram illustrates, follows a similar pattern.
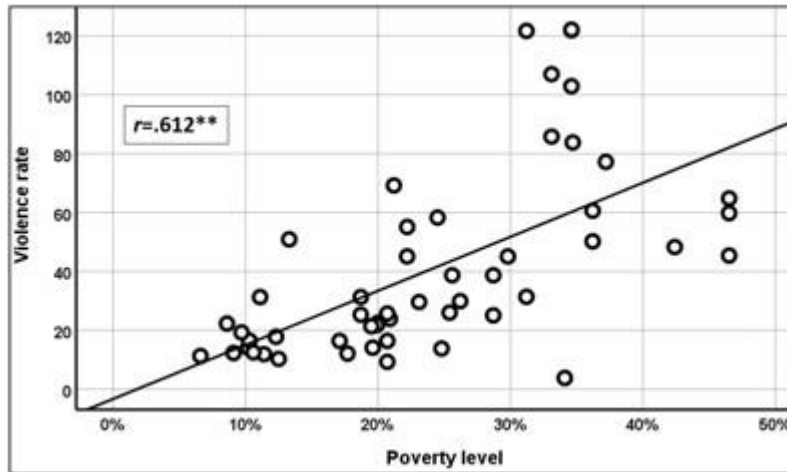
Each circle represents one of our fifty-two neighborhoods. Clearly, as poverty increases, so does violence. Number crunchers pay attention: the *r* correlation statistic (zero means no relationship; one is a perfect, lock-step association) is a sizeable .612; what's more, the two asterisks mean the coefficient (the .612) is statistically significant, with less than one chance in a hundred that it was produced by chance.

So what happens when we plug in race? This group of scattergrams depicts the "simple" (read: potentially misleading) relationship between each racial/ethnic group and violent crime:
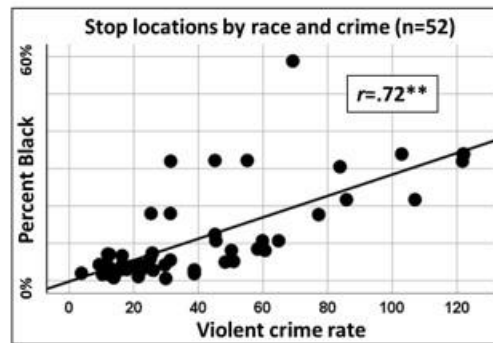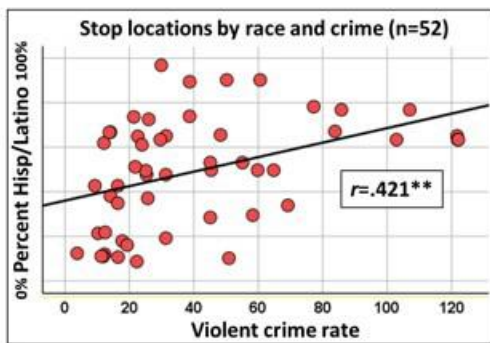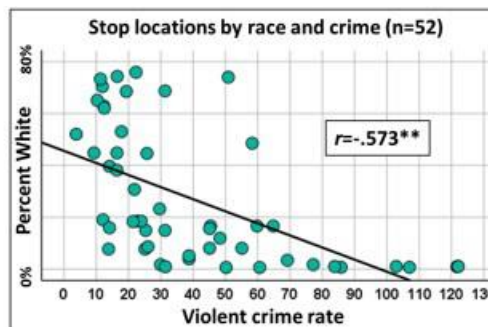
As percent Hispanic/Latino and Black increase so does violence, while as percent white increases, violence falls. But we know full well that violence isn't "caused" by race or ethnicity. It's influenced by a variety of factors; for example, family supports, peer influences, childcare, educational, training, job and career opportunities, and so on. Of course, we'd love to assess the impact of each, but things would quickly become unwieldly. Instead, we can turn to poverty as their surrogate. Going back to the 52-neighborhood sample, let's see whether factoring in ("controlling for") poverty makes a difference:

Correlation between violence rate and …

		PctLatin	PctWhi	PctBlk
ViolentRate	Pearson Correlation	.421**	-.573**	.720**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.000	.000
	N	52	52	52

Same, controlling for poverty level

		PctLatin	PctWhi	PctBlk
ViolentRate	Correlation	.078	-.236	.694
	Significance (2-tailed)	.588	.095	.000
	df	49	49	49

Sure enough, once poverty is thrown into the mix, the simple ("zero-order") relationships between race/ethnicity and crime substantially weaken. In fact, the correlations between race/ethnicity and violence for Hispanic/Latinos and for whites recede so far that their significance exceeds .05, the maximum risk that social scientists will take that what seems to be a relationship was produced by chance. What's more, controlling for poverty is a crude approach. Imagine if one could accurately "control" for the influence of each and every important factor. Might the relationships between race/ethnicity and violence drop to zero?

Of course, neither criminologists nor cops nor ordinary citizens are surprised by the notion that violence is a byproduct of economic conditions. Even under the most sophisticated targeting protocols, police crackdowns usually wind up focused on poor places because that's where violence takes its worst toll. Alas, as we recently pointed out in "Driven to Fail," the imprecision of policing – and the behavior of some admittedly imperfect cops – can easily produce a wealth of "false positives," straining officer-citizen

relationships that may already rest on flimsy supports. And leading to outcomes such as what drove us to write this piece.

To be sure, there are "yes, buts." Check out our (thankfully) final graphic:
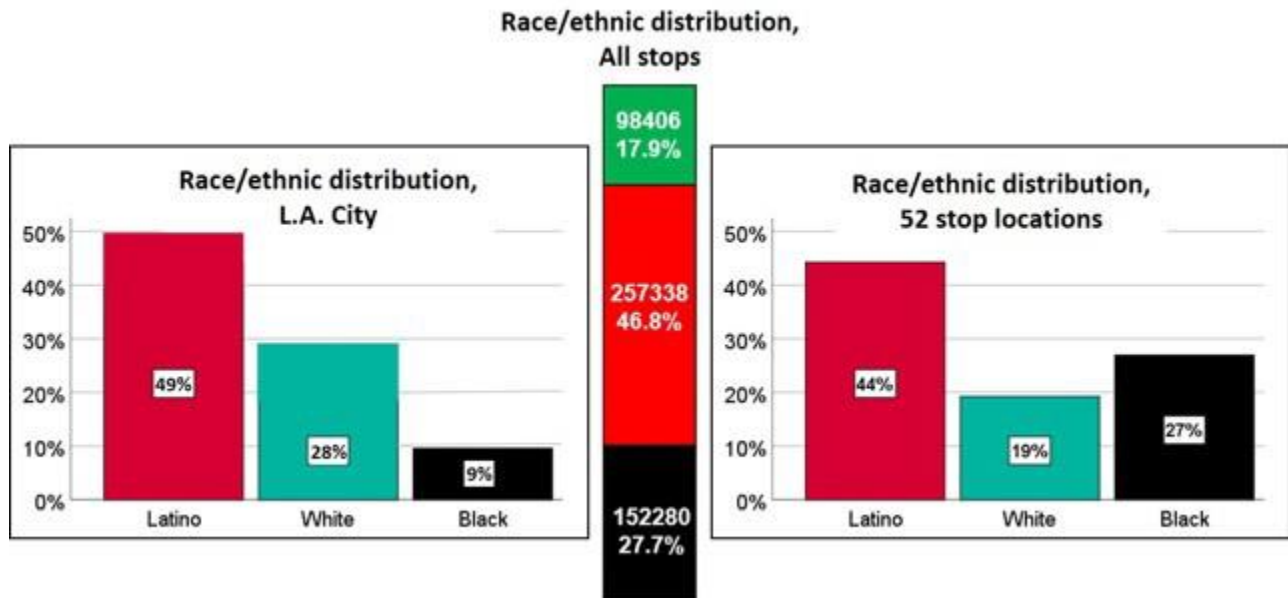
Suspicions at the *L.A. Times* were aroused by the discovery that an unseemly small percentage (17.9) of vehicle stops were of whites. Does that mean that L.A.'s cops are bigots? Well, as we've discussed, the targeting protocol zeroed in on 52 areas (right-side graphic) whose proportions of white and black residents differ substantially from their citywide numbers (left-side graphic.) And in the end, the racial/ethnic distributions of those stopped (center graphic) closely approximates that of the right-side graphic, meaning the population officers actually faced.

Yes, but. Maybe cops expressed their bigoted nature in another way. After all, how does one "explain" that only *five percent* of car stops of whites resulted in a search? (For Latinos it was 16.1 percent; for Blacks, 23.3.) And that *more* contraband was found when the few, unlucky whites *got* searched? Might it be, as the *Times* clearly implies, that in their haste to lock up Blacks and Hispanics L.A.'s finest purposely overlooked far more serious evil-doing by whites?

Well, that's enough for now. Part II will continue exploring the disparities using data from several obscurely coded fields in the master file. We'll also have something to say about the types of contraband seized and from whom. (Thanks to the dataset's unwieldly

structure, that takes some doing.) And we'll probably close off with some inspiring words of wisdom about vigorous policing. But that's for next time. So stay tuned!