

## IN DEPTH: IDENTIFYING AND COMBATTING PROFILING AND RACIAL PROFILING

Profiling is when people are targeted by authorities based on stereotypes instead of reasonable suspicions. A common form of profiling is racial profiling. The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) defines racial profiling as “any action undertaken for reasons of safety, security or public protection, that relies on stereotypes about race, colour, ethnicity, ancestry, religion, or place of origin, or a combination of these, rather than on a reasonable suspicion, to single out an individual for greater scrutiny or different treatment”<sup>74</sup>.

When people act on stereotypes, they are acting on preconceived, oversimplified, and often prejudicial beliefs about a person’s characteristics. These beliefs are based on wider conceptions about their identity group. Far too often, stereotypes are false, negative, and used in hurtful ways.

Unfortunately, people in positions of authority—people who ought to know better—sometimes act on their stereotypical views. The OHRC report on racial profiling found such incidents having taken place:

- a law enforcement official assumes someone is more likely to have committed a crime because he is African Canadian
- school personnel treat a Latino child’s behaviour as an infraction under its zero tolerance policy while the same action by another child might be seen as normal “kids’ play”
- a private security guard follows an African American shopper because she believes the shopper is more likely to steal from the store
- an employer wants a stricter security clearance for a Muslim employee after September 11<sup>th</sup>
- a bar refuses to serve Aboriginal patrons because of an assumption that they will get drunk and rowdy
- a criminal justice system official refuses bail to a Latin American person because of a belief that people from her country are violent
- a landlord asks a Chinese student to move out because she believes that the tenant will expose her to SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) even though the tenant has not been to any hospitals, facilities or countries associated with a high risk of SARS<sup>75</sup>

The report points to studies by psychologists and criminologists who research the impact of profiling. These studies show that such incidents are not just mere inconveniences. Rather, they have profoundly negative impacts on the well-being of the person who has been profiled. As well, profiling has a broader negative effect on the social harmony of the wider community.

While racial profiling has received much-needed attention in recent years, Mariposa bank mystery suggests that people have been acting on false and negative views of “others” for some time. Because *Sunshine Sketches* was written at a time when Canada and its narratives were

---

74 Ontario Human Rights Commission. *Paying the price: The human cost of racial profiling*. [www.ohrc.on.ca/en/paying-price-human-cost-racial-profiling](http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/paying-price-human-cost-racial-profiling)

75 Ontario Human Rights Commission.

predominantly white, the profiling in Mariposa is not race-based. Rather, the shooting at the bank is used by the police in Missinaba County to profile “vagrants and suspicious characters” in a misguided attempt to ensure security and public safety:

a number of arrests – mostly vagrants and suspicious characters – were made.... One man was arrested twenty miles away, at the other end of Missinaba County, who not only corresponded exactly with the description of the robber, but, in addition to this, had a wooden leg. Vagrants with one leg are always regarded with suspicion in places like Mariposa, and whenever a robbery or a murder happens they are arrested in batches. (151)

While the people profiled were white, the underlying foundation is the same: people being singled out because they are “different.”

Because profiling and racial profiling can happen in so many situations, there is not a single approach to follow if you or someone you know suspects that it has taken place. That said, the African Canadian Legal Clinic has put together a helpful Anti-Racial Profiling Toolkit. While its suggestions are primarily based on incidents of police engaging in racial profiling, the toolkit has advice that can be adapted for any suspected incident of racial profiling. According to the ACLC, relevant considerations for determining if racial profiling took place include:

- statements were made to indicate the existence of stereotyping or prejudice (such as racial slurs)
- a non-existent, contradictory, or changing story is given for why someone was subjected to greater scrutiny or differential treatment
- an explanation is offered that does not accord with common sense
- the situation would have unfolded differently had the person been from a non-profiled group
- the person in the position of authority overstepped their powers<sup>76</sup>

The method of reporting the incident will depend upon who has oversight of the person that is suspected of racial profiling. It could be reported to the police oversight watchdog, the provincial human rights commission, or the school board for example.

It is important to take action in incidents of racial profiling. However, perhaps the best way to combat profiling and especially racial profiling over the long term is to help build a non-racist, non-judgmental society. This is not easy work. It includes becoming aware of your own prejudices, and helping others see their prejudices. Working towards this will not only reduce racial profiling, but it will also build public trust.





## DISCUSS

1. The Ontario Human Rights Commission says that “Stereotyping becomes a particular concern when people act on their stereotypical views in a way that affects others. This is what leads to profiling. Although anyone can experience profiling, racialized persons are primarily affected”<sup>77</sup>.
  - a) Why are profiling and racial profiling wrong?
  - b) What kinds of harms will profiling create for the people targeted? For society as a whole?
2. Have there been incidents of profiling and racial profiling in your community? What can you do to reduce and end it?
3. Profiling existed in *Sunshine Sketches*, a book written over 100 years ago. What does this tell us about the pervasiveness of this problem? What does this tell us about human nature?