

OPINION



My Mother, Stopped for Driving While Black

Mistreatment isn't new, nor is it surprising

BY MILEN MEHARI

When the police pulled their guns on my mother, I reached for my phone and told her to be calm and do as they say.



My parents and I had just been swarmed by police cars, sirens blaring, as we drove on I-64 through Virginia. Shock and fear consumed my family as we came to a stop and were ordered out of the vehicle at gunpoint. A third car even showed up to stop traffic.

The officers then arrested my mother without any explanation. I felt helpless.

As I questioned the police about why they stopped a family of three just driving along and minding our own business, a passing white motorist stopped his car. He gave the

police officers a thumbs-up and told them, "We support the great job you're doing."

I was stunned.

My parents sought asylum in the United States from Eritrea many years ago. We work hard and obey the rules. But that's not enough. In a sad twist of fate, our family has stumbled into institutional injustice in a new form.

Eventually the arresting officer accused my mother both of going too slow and eluding his siren for 10 miles. Three police cars, guns, and handcuffs for my middle-aged mom, apparently for going too slow on a highway. Being too cautious seems to be yet another thing that can get you stopped for driving while black.

Two weeks later, police in Minnesota stopped Philando Castile for an alleged broken taillight. When Castile reached for his identification, he carefully told the cop his every move. To avoid any wrong assumptions, he explained that he had a license to carry a concealed weapon, which he had

in the car.

Castile was then shot several times and killed. What was his crime? Is a broken taillight a reason to be shot? Is driving too slow a reason to be handcuffed at gunpoint, surrounded by three cop cars?

The mistreatment of black people by police officers isn't new, nor is it surprising. According to the Justice Department, black people are almost four times more likely than whites to experience the use of force during police encounters.

Before Castile's slaying by the St. Anthony Police Department, he'd been stopped by police over 50 times and acquired thousands of dollars in fines and fees. Castile's mother had encouraged her son to complain about the police's racial profiling. But like many black people, Castile chose not to.

Why bother reporting police harassment, they reason, to the very people who commit the assault?

During our eight-hour drive to Alleghany County Court, I


remember being so confident that the judge would be on my mother's side. The police had no evidence at all, and they'd plainly exposed my family to unnecessary emotional and financial hardship. Surely, the judge would see that.

I was wrong. Not only was my mother found guilty of both counts, they also revoked her driver's license. Our lawyer refused to press our case, demurring, "I'm not in the business of suing police officers."

We are but one of thousands of black families in America who are targeted, profiled, fined, incarcerated, and — as we saw with Castile — sometimes killed by unaccountable police officers and a justice system that supports them.

The American dream can't be a reality if the very color of our skin makes us criminals in the eyes of the law.

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