

Class Disparities and Discrimination in Traffic Stops and Searches

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Abstract

We document class disparities and discrimination in the incidence of police searches. Low-income motorists are more likely to be pursued in pretext stops and to be searched for contraband. Yet searches of low-income motorists are less likely to yield contraband. To isolate class-based discrimination, we show that motorists stopped in multiple vehicles are more likely to be searched when stopped in a vehicle that signals they are low-income. Overall contraband yield would increase if police did not engage in vehicle-based profiling. We provide suggestive evidence that lower hassle costs associated with arrests of low-income motorists help to explain trooper behavior.