

CHARLES M. BLOW

Welcome to the 'Club'

Gates's arrest hits a nerve with black men.

This week, the fog of racial profiling hung heavy over Harvard Square.

The arrest of Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., the eminent Harvard scholar, at his own home thrust the police's treatment of minorities, particularly black men, back into the spotlight.

Whether one thinks race was a factor in this arrest may depend largely on the prism through which the conflicting accounts are viewed. For many black men, it's through a prism stained by the fact that a negative, sometimes racially charged, encounter with a policeman is a far-too-common rite of passage.

A New York Times/CBS News poll conducted last July asked: "Have you ever felt you were stopped by the police just because of your race or ethnic background?" Sixty-six percent of black men said yes. Only 9 percent of white men said the same.

These views are not without merit. A series of racial-profiling studies across the country have found that blacks and Hispanics are more likely to be stopped and searched than whites.

In fact, last year the [Center for Constitutional Rights](#), a New York law firm specializing in human rights, released a damning study of the racial-profiling practices of the New York Police Department. It found that more than 80 percent of those stopped and frisked were black or Hispanic. The report also said that when stopped, 45 percent of blacks and Hispanics were frisked, compared with 29 percent of whites, even though white suspects were 70 percent more likely than black suspects to have a weapon.

It's such a sensitive issue for black men that even the Black Man in Chief dove into the fray on Wednesday, reiterating that the issue of racial profiling "still haunts us." So passionate was his empathy that it caused him to err. His comment that the police behaved "stupidly" was not very smart. On Friday, he acknowledged as much.

Mr. Gates may be able to take some solace in the fact that his rite of passage came later in his life — a life that he told

me on Thursday has been insulated "by a cocoon of racial tolerance, enlightenment and reason." Still, as one commenter on my Facebook page put it: "Tell Doc, welcome to the 'club.'"

My own induction into the "club" came when I was an 18-year-old college freshman. I was in a car with my friend Andre. We were young black men in a mostly white section of the mostly white town in Louisiana, about three miles from the college town where we lived.

As we drove, a police car began to trail us. Before we reached the city limits, its lights came on.

We stopped, and a white police officer approached. Andre got his license and motioned to me to get the registration from the glove box. When I opened it, a switch blade comb fell out. It was like the one the Fonz had on "Happy Days." They were popular prizes at local fairs and carnivals at the time.

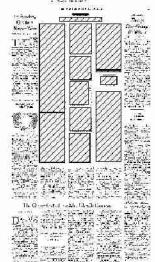
The officer drew his gun. I froze. Then, realizing that it was just a comb, I told him so and pushed the button to make the comb pop up. I thought it was kind of funny. I was the only one. The officer grew irritated. He commanded me to "drop the weapon" and told Andre to exit the car.

Andre insisted on knowing why we had been stopped. The officer gave a reason. It wasn't true. Then he said something I will never forget: that if he wanted to, he could make us lie down in the middle of the road and shoot us in the back of the head and no one would say anything about it. Then he walked to his car and drove away.

He had raised the specter of executing us. He wanted to impress upon us his power and our worth, or lack thereof. We were shocked, afraid, humiliated and furious. We were the good guys — dean's list students with academic scholarships. I was the freshman class president. This wasn't supposed to happen to us.

As a child, I had been taught, in subtle ways, to be leery of the police. It wasn't that they were all bad, but you never wanted to have to find out which ones were. As my mother would say, they were to be "fed with a long-handled spoon." This was the first day that I fully understood what that meant.

We drove back to our college town



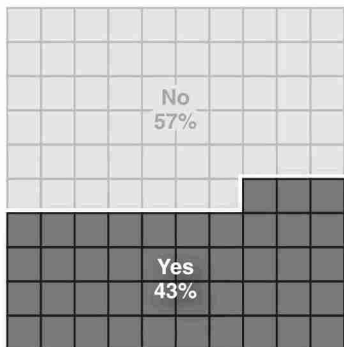
and stopped at the house of Andre's father. Andre asked him what we should do. Happy that we were alive, he just told us to drop it. I have spent 20 years trying to drop it.

Even so, I committed myself to breaking this cycle when I had my own kids. That became impossible the day after Thanksgiving a couple of years ago. A white police officer stopped me when I was in the car with my children. He said that I was using my cellphone while driving. In fact, I had answered a call at a stoplight. When the light turned green, I put the phone away. I thought this was a case that could be debated, so I debated it. That didn't sit well with the officer. He went back to his car to write up a ticket. When he returned, he had two tickets. The second one, he told me, was for not wearing a seat belt, that he believed I had only put it on as I was being pulled over. That was not true. My kids were flabbergasted. They knew the officer was wrong, so they began to protest. I quieted them. When the officer drove off, I had a frank talk with them.

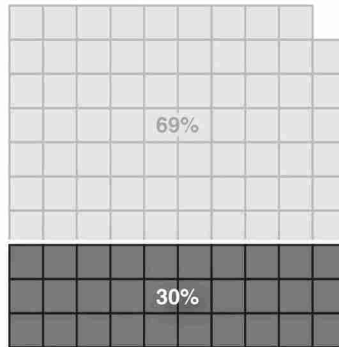
I told them that although most officers are brave and honorable men and women doing their best to protect and serve, there were, unfortunately, some bad seeds. Although I could not be sure that race had had any bearing on what the officer had done, I felt the need to tell my boys that as black men, we may sometimes take more of the brunt of those bad officers' actions. As I spoke, my heart sank. Despite my best efforts to prevent it, the cycle of suspicion and mutual mistrust was tumbling forward into yet another generation. My children were one step closer to joining the "club." □

"Have you ever felt you were stopped by the police just because of your race or ethnic background?"

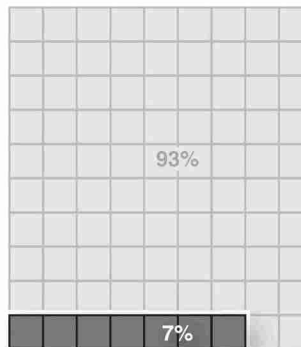
All blacks



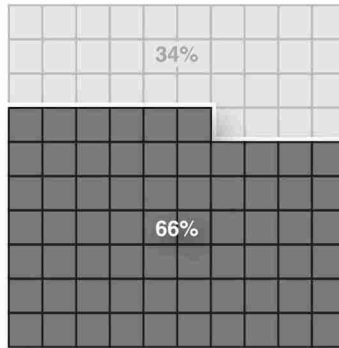
All Hispanics



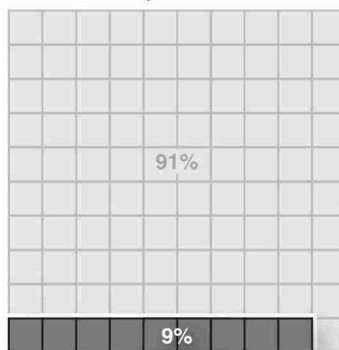
All whites



Black men only



White men only



Data for Hispanic men not available.

Source: A New York Times/CBS News poll of 1,796 people from July 7-14, 2008.