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Americans Love Arizona's New Law, But Do They Understand It?

[Politics / Law Enforcement & Crime](#) [Robert Gammon](#) — Thu, May 13, 2010 at 12:44 PM

The Bay Area may be alarmed and disgusted by Arizona's tough new anti-immigration law, but the rest of the country appears [to support it in a big way](#), providing more evidence of the nation's historic shift to the right over the past year. According to a new McClatchy-Ipsos poll, 64 percent of registered voters nationwide favored the new law, which requires Arizona police to demand identification from people they suspect are in the country illegally. Most Americans, apparently, have no problem with racial profiling.

It should come as no surprise, really. Americans have a long history of scapegoating immigrants during tough economic times. After all, it's easy to blame "illegal immigrants" for the fact that you're out of a job or you're about to lose your house to foreclosure. But it's also not clear whether most white Americans understand the true ramifications of Arizona's new law.

Conservatives and other supporters of the law say it won't target Latinos based on the color of their skin. They note that people won't be required to show ID unless they've been stopped by police for some other legal reason. But crime statistics show that cops are far more likely to stop minorities than whites. It even happens in liberal New York City.

The *New York Times* published a story yesterday showing that blacks and Latinos [are nine times more likely to be stopped by NYPD than whites](#). And it's not because blacks and Latinos are lawbreakers. In fact, the *Times* reported that even though police stop them far more often, blacks and Latinos are no more likely to be arrested than whites. In other words, minorities are being stopped by police in one of the most liberal cities in America because of the color of their skin. From the *Times*:

According to the analysis of the 2009 raw data by the Center for Constitutional Rights, nearly 490,000 blacks and Latinos were stopped by the police on the streets last year, compared with 53,000 whites.

But once stopped, the arrest rates were virtually the same. Whites were arrested in slightly more than 6 percent of the stops, blacks in slightly fewer than 6 percent. About 1.7 percent of whites who were stopped were found to have a weapon, while 1.1 percent of blacks were found with one.

Given that, some experts who have studied stop-and-frisk data over the last several years say that what prompts an officer's suspicion for a stop, and the discretion used, are important.

In examining the stated reasons for the stops, as checked off by police officers on department forms, the center found that about 15 percent of the stops last year cited “fits a relevant description.” Officers can check off more than one reason, but in nearly half the stops, the category called “furtive movements” was cited. Nearly 30 percent of stops cited a category called “casing a victim or location”; nearly 19 percent cited a catchall category of “other.”

“These stats suggest that racial disparities in who gets stopped has more to do with officer bias and discretion than with crime rates, which is what the Police Department argues,” said Darius Charney, a lawyer with the Center for Constitutional Rights.

If racial profiling happens in New York, you can bet it’s even worse in conservative Arizona. And so Arizona police now have an extra reason to stop Latinos — to check if they have the proper papers. And you can bet that in those rare instances when whites get stopped for “furtive movements” or “fits a relevant description,” they won’t be required to prove their citizenship either.

And so Arizona’s new law may be popular throughout the country, but it’s not clear that most white Americans realize how common it already is for minorities to be stopped by police. And this new law promises to only make it worse.