



## “Don’t Focus on Racial Profiling”

by B.B. Robinson, Ph.D.

Now Harvard’s Prof. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. knows what at least 20% of all Black American males know: How it feels to be arrested and to be treated as three-fifths of a person by the criminal justice system.

Today, *The Washington Post* published the story of Gates’ arrest on July 16, 2009 at his home in Cambridge, MA. (See the July 21<sup>st</sup> article entitled “Gates Says He is Outraged by Arrest at Cambridge Home.”) It recounts how many White police treat Black suspects. It describes how, irrespective of countervailing evidence, many White police hone in on, not seeking justice, but on their reality that a Black man is guilty until proven innocent. Prof. Gates must have been especially perturbed by the arrest given that, genetically, he has significantly more European roots than African roots.

In response to his arrest, the charges for which have been dropped, Gates says that he plans to “make a documentary about racial profiling for PBS” (Public Broadcasting System). Given Gates’ cachet as a scholar, a maker of documentaries, and his recent clash with the law, the proposed documentary

would likely draw much acclaim. However, we should pause and ask, “Is a documentary on racial profiling the best response to the Gates experience?”

Undoubtedly, there are already documentaries on racial profiling. Scholars, especially economists, have examined and written about the subject. Moreover, “Driving while Black” and “Shopping while Black” are common parlance in the American vernacular. Therefore, it is unclear how such a documentary could effectively transform the American social and cultural landscape.

However, a different approach might effectively turn that landscape on its head. Instead of examining an outcome (racial profiling), why doesn’t Prof. Gates examine the underlying cause (the media)? A major hurdle to using the latter approach is that the media may not cozy up to the idea.

Assuming for the moment that the media accepts an airing of its subliminal powers and imposition of indignities, then Prof. Gates could show what Prof. Jerry Kang discusses in his March 2005

*Harvard Law Review* article, “Trojan Horses of Race”: That is, Black males and crime are nearly synonymous in the American psyche—mainly because of the media.

Prof. Gates might also show that it is, to a significant extent, because of media presentations of Black males as criminals that the Black unemployment rate is twice the national average as revealed in my recent article, “Black Unemployment and Infotainment,” which was published in the January 2009 issue of the *Economic Inquiry* journal.

Deductive reasoning leads us to the conclusion that the media plays a significant role in creating the income and wealth outcomes that Black Americans experience today, which, in turn, makes it possible for Black males to be bound in the criminal justice system at such alarming rates.

It is important to realize that one cannot expect new outcomes by responding to circumstances using old approaches. Producing a documentary on racial profiling is an old approach to an old problem, and it will only raise fear, anger, and hate on both sides of the issue.

However, an attack on the root cause of racial profiling—the media—can lead to an excision of the racial stereotypes that are driven by a White supremacy mentality that continues to sicken the nation. If, after conducting and airing a proper analysis of the media’s role in creating and perpetuating racist stereotypes, there is no improvement in the treatment of Black Americans, then Black Americans can proceed to the next move in the strategic game of making the United States of America a nation of liberty and justice for all.

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