

Reading

Thank you for welcoming me to join you today. I will begin with a reading from the book *Native Son* by Richard Wright

“Pity can purge us of hostility and arouse feelings of identification with the characters, but it can also be a consoling reassurance which leads us to believe that we have understood, and that, in pitying, we have even done something to right a wrong.”

Homily

I have always admired your Unitarian Universalist support of open inquiry and commitment to social justice, and I will strive to live up to these ideals this morning with you.

As I thought more about my topic of race, policing and the limitations of research in promoting social justice I realize that it is more nuanced than it would seem, and that it connects more broadly to our social institutions.

Yes, I will briefly summarize my research on local policing and race, and I will discuss a few themes along with that. The place where race and policing intersect is nuanced and finding clear causation is elusive. I will also discuss how race intersects with virtually every sector of our society in ways that are, and should be, very discomfoting to each one of us. Racial disproportionality is one reflection of what we tolerate from our social institutions – research has illuminated our social problems, though research alone will not result in action.

Briefly, my research over five years, based on 40,000 police stops that were initiated by Spokane Police Department officers, consistently showed that our Black and Native American neighbors were significantly more likely to than their White counterparts to be stopped, searched, arrested, or have force use against them. Almost all uses of force were related to arrests. It is clear that disproportionality is present in Spokane Police officers' stops.

Now for the nuanced part of my research. 95% of searches from these officer-initiated stops were after an arrest, which is a standard procedure in any law enforcement agency. The other 5% were officer safety frisks, which are highly discretionary for officers. I also found that this percentage was roughly the same across racial groups, with no significant difference for any group. Arrests resulting from officer-initiated stops

were approximately half for existing warrants and half for new charges. Again, I found that this percentage was roughly the same across racial groups, with no significant difference for any group.

The results of my research confirmed a phenomenon that is obvious to every person of color about disproportionate police contact for members of racial minority groups. The results also revealed that the results of the contacts are more nuanced. Although the data point to our Black and Native neighbors being stopped more frequently than White people, the data does not point them being subjected to more discretionary searches or arrested on new charges. What emerged to me is that the disproportionate overall search and arrest rates stem from the disproportionate stop rate.

The other very important consideration about my research is that all I was studying was observed behavior. My research cannot legitimately assert causes for what I observed. I have learned that there are no simple narratives about race and policing.

I want you to consider that our police are one of many of our social institutions. When you look at other social institutions, including finance and education for two examples, it becomes clear that we have more than a police problem and that racial disproportionality is pervasive in our society. I offer a few examples for you:

Income data from the 2019 American Community Survey reveal that;

White median household income was \$70,000

Black median household income was \$44,000, 63% of Whites

Native American household income was \$46,000, 66% of Whites

Latino household income was \$56,000, 80% of Whites

Wealth data from the 2019 American Community Survey reveal that;

Median assets for White households was \$187,000

Median assets for Black households was \$14,000, 7% of Whites

Median assets for Latino households was \$32,000, 17% of Whites

The Census Bureau could not accurately calculate this for Native American households.

The data are abundantly clear that there are fundamental economic disparities in the U.S. today. The income gap is far from closed. The wealth gap is vast. The wealth gap comes from people of color being locked out of home ownership through practices such as realtor steering clients based on race and neighborhood redlining by mortgage lenders. These practices were not formally illegalized until the 1980s. There are recent reports showing that home appraisals are systematically lower for Black owned homes than for White ones. Back when redlining was allowed, the percent of minority residents in a neighborhood was considered a financial risk factor by the mortgage actuaries. Looking closer to home, many of the homes

that us Spokanites own have race-based home sale covenants embedded in our deeds.

Continuing to look close to home my very own EWU School of Social Work has an undergraduate student body that averaged 37% Latino over the past five years. Our graduate student body has averaged 15% Latino over the past five years. We have no full-time faculty members who are Latino, and this is a School of Social Work where we espouse equity and social justice.

The reason that I used an example from my own immediate workplace is to illustrate that our social institutions reflect what each of us allow and tolerate. More on that in a moment.

You may recall that about a year ago a consulting group, Police Strategies, from Seattle, completed a study for the Spokane Police Department concluding that there was no racial disproportionality in police stops. They

based this on data from civilian calls for service identifying alleged perpetrators of criminal acts as Black or Native American. There are several reasons that this is an inappropriate baseline measure to use, and I invite you to contact me at EWU if you want me to further discuss my assertion with you. The news media contacted me, and Lois James from WSU, and independently of each other we both, without having discussed the consultant's study with each other, similarly refuted the results. I was accurately quoted as saying that the study's assertion of minority criminality being the cause of disproportionate police contact was an old narrative in a new veneer.

The reason I share this anecdote is to illustrate the limitation of using research to influence social justice. Chief Meidl and former Mayor Condon didn't like the results of my research and hired consultants who

included a retired prosecutor and a retired police chief to study a matter that had already been extensively studied, and they got the result that they paid for. Even if our city leaders had not done this, the observed rates of disproportionality never substantially moved during the years between my two studies, and our City Council is still fighting the Mayor and Police Guild to fully implement the City Charter amendment for police oversight that 70% of us voted for eight years ago.

Research will not change our social institutions, only we can do that. There are many ways to engage in direct action, demonstrating, testifying before commissions and councils, writing letters and op-ed articles, campaigning for candidates who will reform our institutions, and perhaps even becoming one such candidate. Research will surely beget more research.

Direct action is more likely than research to beget social change.

Returning to our reading from Richard Wright, we may feel pity for our neighbors of color, and may feel something deeper than pity, like empathy. We may intellectually understand the mechanisms of oppression, such as the wealth and earnings data I shared today. We may have courageous conversations about racial, social, economic, and criminal justice issues. In academe we often change the language that we use, believing that this is change itself. In moving our society forward toward justice we can begin by differentiating between feeling or talking, and having done something to right a wrong.

Thank you for sharing part of your Sunday with me.