



Facial Recognition Algorithm Caused Wrongful Arrest

This story reveals why Amazon, IBM and Microsoft have pulled out of the facial recognition business in order to deflect certain criticism over racial bias. In this instance, the algorithm nailed the wrong black man for a crime he did not commit. □ TN Editor

On a Thursday afternoon in January, Robert Julian-Borchak Williams was in his office at an automotive supply company when he got a call from the Detroit Police Department telling him to come to the station to be arrested. He thought at first that it was a prank.

An hour later, when he pulled into his driveway in a quiet subdivision in Farmington Hills, Mich., a police car pulled up behind, blocking him in. Two officers got out and handcuffed Mr. Williams on his front lawn, in front of his wife and two young daughters, who were distraught. The police wouldn't say why he was being arrested, only showing him a piece of paper with his photo and the words "felony warrant" and "larceny."

His wife, Melissa, asked where he was being taken. "Google it," she recalls an officer replying.

The police drove Mr. Williams to a detention center. He had his mug shot, fingerprints and DNA taken, and was held overnight. Around noon

on Friday, two detectives took him to an interrogation room and placed three pieces of paper on the table, face down.

“When’s the last time you went to a Shinola store?” one of the detectives asked, in Mr. Williams’s recollection. Shinola is an upscale boutique that sells watches, bicycles and leather goods in the trendy Midtown neighborhood of Detroit. Mr. Williams said he and his wife had checked it out when the store first opened in 2014.

The detective turned over the first piece of paper. It was a still image from a surveillance video, showing a heavysset man, dressed in black and wearing a red St. Louis Cardinals cap, standing in front of a watch display. Five timepieces, worth \$3,800, were shoplifted.

“Is this you?” asked the detective.

The second piece of paper was a close-up. The photo was blurry, but it was clearly not Mr. Williams. He picked up the image and held it next to his face.

“No, this is not me,” Mr. Williams said. “You think all Black men look alike?”

Mr. Williams knew that he had not committed the crime in question. What he could not have known, as he sat in the interrogation room, is that his case may be the first known account of an American being wrongfully arrested based on a flawed match from a facial recognition algorithm, according to experts on technology and the law.

A faulty system

A nationwide debate is raging about [racism in law enforcement](#). Across the country, millions are protesting not just the actions of individual officers, but bias in the systems used to surveil communities and identify people for prosecution.

Facial recognition systems have been used by police forces for [more than two decades](#). Recent studies by [M.I.T.](#) and the [National Institute of Standards and Technology](#), or NIST, have found that while the

technology works relatively well on white men, the results are less accurate for other demographics, in part because of a lack of diversity in the images used to develop the underlying databases.

Last year, during a public hearing about the use of [facial recognition in Detroit](#), an assistant police chief was among those who raised concerns. “On the question of false positives — that is absolutely factual, and it’s well-documented,” James White said. “So that concerns me as an African-American male.”

This month, [Amazon](#), [Microsoft](#) and [IBM](#) announced they would stop or [pause](#) their facial recognition offerings for law enforcement. The gestures were largely symbolic, given that the companies are not big players in the industry. The technology police departments use is supplied by companies that aren’t household names, such as Vigilant Solutions, Cognitec, NEC, Rank One Computing and [Clearview AI](#).

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