

Supreme Court refines rules governing police conduct

By Ari Melber, MSNBC

While the public debate over American policing has been roiling for months, a quieter debate has been playing out at the Supreme Court, which is now refining some of the rules that govern police conduct across the country.

During the court's current term, which concludes at the end of June, the justices have already ruled on three cases regarding controversial police conduct. The court often sides with police, and frequently at the behest of the Obama Justice Department.

One of the recurring criticisms of aggressive or "zero tolerance" policing is that some officers stop people for little to no reason. The court recently weighed in on part of that controversy, taking a case about a traffic stop in North Carolina. An officer said he had a good reason for the stop – a broken brake light – and then he searched the car and found cocaine. But it is perfectly legal to drive with one brake light under state law, so a lower court threw out the cocaine evidence, reasoning it was discovered through an unjustified stop.

The Supreme Court reversed, however, ruling that officers can be mistaken about the law and still perform a valid search.

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