

THE PEED. "IF YOU TRY TO RUN, WE WILL SHOOT YOU," HE SAYS THEY TOLD HIM.

Agency spokesperson Dennis Murphy says, "This is drugs that otherwise would have ended up on the streets."

While a cop needs "probable cause" that you are carrying something illegal before he can search you, customs inspectors must have only a "reasonable suspicion" that a traveler is carrying contraband before they can do a pat-down or strip-search [see sidebar]. Customs inspectors have greater authority to conduct searches because they are charged with policing the nation's borders and stopping drugs from entering the US.

But for passengers who are forced to put their hands against the wall and spread their legs, such legal logistics hardly seem to matter. The suspicions of some travelers that they are being singled out because of their skin color can make the experience of stripping in front of strangers all the more enraging. Just ask Sharon Anderson.

In August 1997, Anderson, 48, was returning home from a vacation in Jamaica when she landed at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. The seventh-grade teacher spent the next seven hours in the custody of customs inspectors—a terror-filled experience from which she has yet to recover. First, there was the pat-search. Three female inspectors took Anderson into a small room at the airport. "They converged on me and began to just grope and feel on my breasts, my back, and my arms and legs. Then I felt someone in my vagina," Anderson recalls. Strange fingers pushed into her anus as well. The school teacher's body tightened, and she screamed: "No! No! No! You can't do that!"

That was just the beginning. Then came the strip-search. According to Anderson, the inspectors told her: "This is what you're going to have to do if you want to leave here: Go over along that wall. Spread your legs. Pull your pants down and your underwear. Bend over and spread your buttocks." Anderson reluctantly complied.

When the inspectors finally freed Anderson at 11 p.m., she pushed her luggage cart outside, sat on the curb, and broke down. Although more than a year has passed since her harrowing experience, Anderson still gets choked up when she talks about it. "I felt like I had been physically and sexually violated," she says, her voice quivering.

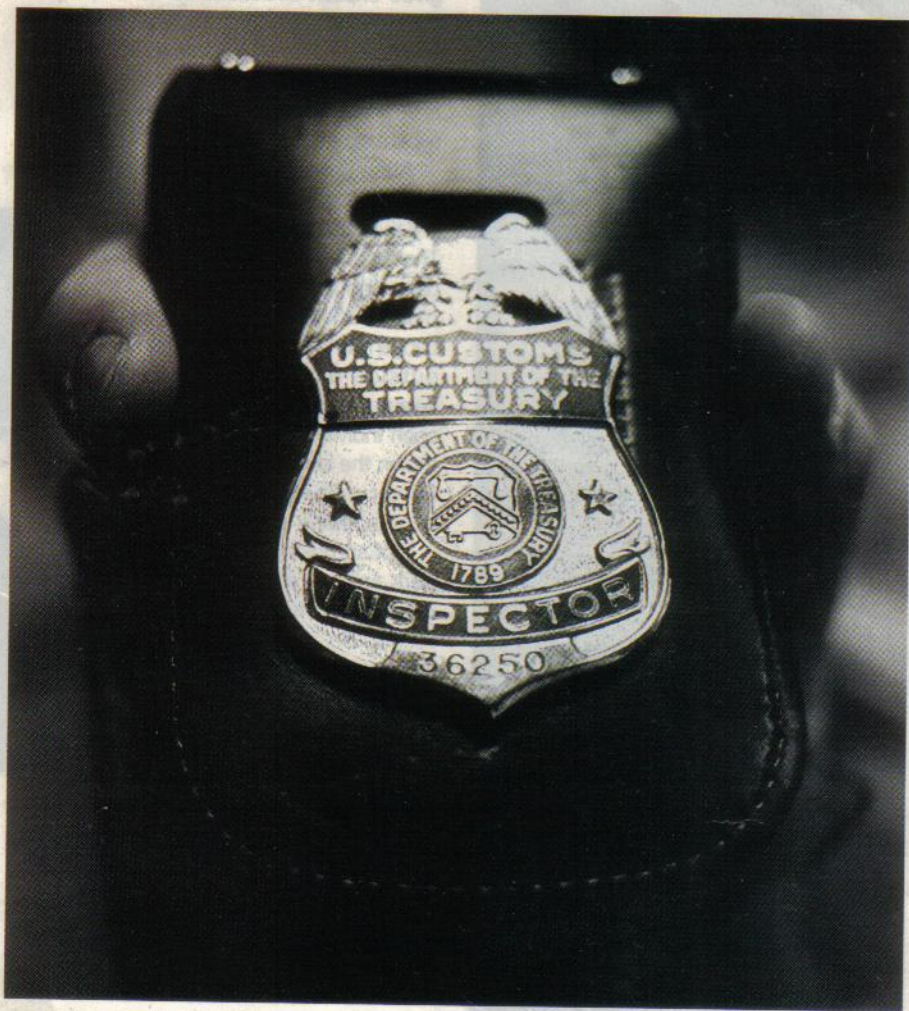
Anderson has not taken another plane trip since her encounter with O'Hare's

customs officials. "To even think of going anywhere makes me very nervous," she says. With a sense of bitter irony, Anderson recalls what the inspectors told her when she loudly protested their search tactics: "If you don't like the way we do things, stay home."

Now Anderson is the lead plaintiff in a federal civil rights lawsuit against the US Customs Service. At press time, her suit has attracted 89 other Black female plain-

women were the most likely fliers to be searched at O'Hare in 1997. Of the 77 women inspectors searched, 47 were Black and 25 were white. Edward Fox, the lawyer representing Anderson and her fellow plaintiffs, says, "I think Black women were targeted the most because they're seen as the most vulnerable [and] as having the least recourse."

But Murphy, in defense of the US Customs Service, warns against drawing



tiffs with similar stories about O'Hare inspectors. Anderson's fellow plaintiffs include a retarded woman, a 13-year-old girl and a 15-year-old girl. Most of these women endured strip and body cavity searches; two were taken to the hospital and X-rayed. In a few cases, customs officers even demanded that women who were menstruating remove their tampons and pads so that officers could inspect them. Customs officials did not find drugs on Anderson or any of her fellow plaintiffs.

Fueling Anderson's lawsuit are US Customs Service statistics showing that Black

widespread conclusions from these Chicago numbers. "The statistics don't bear out that we have a nationwide problem of singling out Black females for intrusive searches," the agency spokesperson says.

Some disagree. In fiscal year 1998, customs officers nationwide performed 2,561 strip-searches on fliers whose race was reported. Ten percent or 280 of these targeted travelers were Black women. Critics charge that customs disproportionately searches them with little reason. "They're wrong more often with Black women than with any other racial or gender group,"