

“Stop & Frisk” – An Abuse of Police Power

At last week’s West Indian Day parade, New York City Councilman Jumaane Williams and Kirsten John Foy, Public Advocate Bill de Blasio’s community affairs director, were stopped by police for walking down a block that was supposed to be off limits. Both men are black. They said they showed police their city-issued identification, and explained that they had permission from a high ranking officer to skirt a barrier and walk on. They were promptly handcuffed.

But that’s not all. A [video](#) of the incident shows officers surrounding Foy and tackling him to the ground. The police claimed that an officer had been punched in the face. By whom they don’t say. Williams termed this a “bald-faced lie.” After Williams and Foy were brought to the local precinct, and identified themselves to calmer officers, they were released.

Williams and Foy, of course, were in a position to secure their own release, demand an explanation, and be taken seriously by Police Commissioner Ray Kelly. But what about the thousands of anonymous New Yorkers without “juice” who are stopped by police, especially young black and Latino men?

Targeting People of Color

It is clearly Police Department policy to target people of color in stop and frisk operations. In 2010, the police made 601,055 stops; more than 80 percent involved blacks and Latinos, mostly young men. Many were stopped multiple times over the course of the year.

Over the years, there have been millions of people stopped by the police; on average, 9 in 10 were not even accused of any crime or violation, no less charged and convicted. A gun was found in slightly more than 0.1 percent of those stops.

The police insist that the stops are based on crime victims’ descriptions of their assailants. But critics say the massive number of stops and the relatively small number of resulting summonses or arrests mean that tens of thousands of innocent people of color are being stopped for no good reason. And we don’t factor into the equation that a stop and frisk is not an encounter without consequences. Being forcibly put up against a wall and frisked is demeaning and hurtful.

Last July, Governor Paterson [signed legislation ending the Police Department’s policy of storing the names and addresses of people police stop and question on the street](#) but who ultimately have done nothing wrong. The police database will still include the reason for the stop as well as the person’s race, age, and location of the stop; but it will no longer include names and addresses. The law applies only to New York City.

But salutary changes to the database haven't stopped the police from continuing to carry out stop and frisk operations against people of color on a scale that boggles the mind. This tactic does nothing more than sow distrust and hatred of the NYPD in communities where real policing might actually be welcomed.

An Occupying Force

The numbers continue to paint a disturbing picture. Estimates are, for example, that last year the police [made 93 stops for every 100 residents in a neighborhood in Brownsville, Brooklyn](#). This is not just an abuse of police tactics; it is the sort of activity that could be expected of the police of an occupying force. And, in fact, that's how the NYPD is viewed by many in Harlem, Bedford Stuyvesant, the South Bronx, and other communities of color. Repeat stop and frisk encounters foster an antagonistic relationship between the police – who are ostensibly there to protect residents – and the community, which sees itself under siege.

The idea behind stop and frisk is for police to question people who they have a reasonable belief might have committed or are about to commit a crime. The police contend that the practice is a necessary tool in their fight to reduce crime, and that the racially disproportionate results simply reflect evidence that black and Latino men commit a disproportionate number of crimes.

But do they? The majority of those incarcerated in New York's state prisons are black and Latino drug users. This is true even though we know that drug usage by whites is greater than by blacks or Latinos. But arrests that reflect this reality don't follow. The police presence is qualitatively and quantitatively different in predominately white areas of the city. Stop and frisk numbers likewise support the sense that the NYPD engages in racial profiling.

The recent civil disorders in Philadelphia and several English cities have been attributed by some to excessive policing tactics in neighborhoods of color where jobs and opportunities are scarce and becoming scarcer, and where the sense has become palpable that government is an agent for bad, not good. With the city's official unemployment rate for black and Latino young men hovering near or above 20 percent – and thousands more not counted because they have given up looking for a job in an economy with one opening for every four unemployed – we cannot support questionable police conduct that divides us along racial lines, sows distrust, and has the potential to result in an explosion of violence.

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