

Community Members Struggle With Stop and Frisk

by Carla Murphy

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Photo by Sophie Forbes .

Within half a year, Harlem mother Mary Black went from not even knowing what a ‘stop-and-frisk’ was to headlining protests against it. She quickly learned that in her neighborhood, snitching on police cleared a crowded room, fast.

Beginning last June, police stopped Black’s 16-year-old son three times in six months. The stops resulted in disorderly conduct summonses, all of which the court dismissed. But the pattern worried Black. Double-checking the whereabouts of her youngest child, knowing the parents of his friends—these methods helped her to successfully raise her first two. But these stop-and frisk-incidents added an unexpected chapter to her already dog-eared parenting handbook. They required interactions with the criminal justice system that Black had not anticipated. Her son did not have a record but each stop increased her fear that soon, he would.

Then in December, during a fourth stop, police arrested Black’s son outside their apartment building on 137th street. Alerted by a neighbor who rang her buzzer, Black flew down four flights of stairs in a house robe, socks and not much else. After tears and pleas, Black says she left

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the precinct that night with her son, another pink summons for disorderly conduct and a determination to defend not just her son but everyone else's too.

For her first rally, planned with the Stop Stop and Frisk Campaign, Black says she distributed over 750 flyers throughout her neighborhood expecting about 100 to attend and share their own stop-and-frisk stories. Fifteen people came.

"That's the saddest part," Black says. "Everybody knows stop-and-frisk is an injustice but it's like you're fighting by yourself."

Black is learning first-hand the challenge facing the city's revitalized but fragmented police reform movement as it looks to influence the 2013 elections: mobilizing ordinary New Yorkers to speak out against the NYPD's controversial stop-and-frisk practice.

Just the Facts

Actually, nine out of every 10 stops are innocent. Of the 3 million stops conducted between 2004 and 2009, about 4,200 yielded guns, or, a seizure rate of 1.5 guns for every 1,000 stops, according to Columbia University professor Jeffrey Fagan. The NYPD hasn't yet released last year's tally but 2010 saw more than 600,000 reported stops, a 500 percent increase since 2002, the year that the mandatory reporting law from a compromise deal between former mayor Rudy Giuliani and city council took effect.

And even though the vast majority of innocent stops occur in black and Latino neighborhoods, interviews reveal a reticence on the part of ordinary New Yorkers to publicly speak out against the practice that NYPD has long credited with getting guns off the street and helping to reduce crime. Their reasons run the gamut from agreeing to fear of retaliation from local police. All point, however, to the corrosive effect of a citywide culture that allows for only two positions, pro- or anti-police, and no middle ground.

Looking for Middle Ground

At a recent Saturday afternoon rally to address, according to the event's flyer, "gun running; planting drugs; stop, question and frisk; and racist Facebook posts,"--all recent incidents involving officers as perpetrators--lead organizer and council member Jumaane Williams began

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with an apparently necessary preface:

“This is not an anti-NYPD rally. This is a pro-better policing and safer streets rally,” said Williams to the roughly 80-person, multi-generational crowd that had gathered under the arch at Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn. Many were community activists from throughout the city but also because of location, on-lookers included runners and shoppers at the weekly farmer’s market.

“We can have those conversations,”--Williams had just led the crowd in a round of applause and praise for NYPD, including officers on scene--“and still want our police officers to be accountable.”

Disclaimers denote however that the forthcoming statement will not be the status quo.

“The police has been very successful at painting critics as either pro- or anti-police,” says Alex Vitale, associate professor of sociology at Brooklyn College and expert in community policing.

“There’s no room for positive constructive criticism so that even those politicians who speak out, feel the need to do a ton of handholding and reassuring--and this [from] an African-American man who’s been subjected personally to these policies.”

The Stigma

In a climate that pressures Williams, an elected official with no history of militancy, to sugar coat criticism of NYPD, staying silent on stop-and-frisk is not an unreasonable option for everyday black and Latino New Yorkers. Unlike Williams’ West Indian Day Parade incident, their police encounters will not be filmed or shown on the evening news.

“They’re afraid,” says Black, explaining why private support from friends and neighbors does not translate into bodies on the street. Her own family worries that because of her newfound activism police may target her son.

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Lumumba Bandele is a senior organizer with the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund and member of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement he has participated in anti-police brutality campaigns since the mid-1990s.

Bandele frames residents' decisions about whether to address stop-and-frisk abuses in their neighborhoods as a choice between the lesser of two evils: "Do I want to be attacked by the police or by my people? Who will do me the least harm?"

Foot traffic, he says, bears towards the latter direction.

Community Needs

But while some community members stay silent out of a fear of police, others stay silent out of a fear of criminals. Stop-and-frisk, they say, helps to keep them safe.

"We assumed that white people on the other side of town had been calling for larger police presence when in truth it has been our grandmothers," says Bandele, whose coming of age in Bedford-Stuyvesant included so many stops he says he lost count.

Repeating Bandele's experience as a younger man on another generation is, for some New Yorkers living in high-crime areas, an acceptable casualty in the war against drugs and violence.

"Most of the more established members of these communities, like homeowners, religious leaders and community board members," Vitale says, "are often more concerned about crime than civil liberties violations."

Looking For Middle Ground

However, some local leaders are reassessing the cost of silence. Brooklyn's Community Board 17 co-sponsored Williams' police accountability rally. Manhattan's Community Board 10 recently voted 25-7 in favor of a resolution initiated by the borough president, calling on NYPD to reform stop-and-frisk.

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“A lot more parents and seniors are approaching me for help getting their son or grandson out of the grip of police,” says Andre Mitchell, founder and chief executive officer of Man Up, Inc!, a multi-service community center in East New York.

“They asked for more police but not with the understanding that stop-and-frisk would target any and everybody.”

Mitchell works both sides. He partners with police to help curb gang violence and runs workshops for youth seeking ways to handle being stopped by them. A frequent mediator, he blames stop-and-frisk for aggravating his efforts.

“I try to close the divisions but it doesn’t help when police stop people for no reason at all,” he says--like, loitering, crossing the park after dusk, sitting in the park, riding a bike on the sidewalk. Then again, he adds, even officers who admit to him that they disagree with the policy must follow their orders.

“Change is going to have to start at the top,” Mitchell says, “with the mayor.”

Reached for comment on whether, as councilman Williams’ charges, stop-and-frisk is a problem, the mayor’s press office referred the matter to NYPD.

Inside Manhattan Criminal Court last Tuesday, Mary Black finally exhaled. The arraignment judge hearing evidence in her son’s disorderly conduct case indicated that telling a police officer, “I don’t give a fuck,” is insufficient justification for an arrest. A trial has been set for March.

“I feel a lot better,” Black says.