

Time to stop the NYPD's 'stop-and-frisk'

Police harassment of young black and Latino men is setting disgraceful records. The justice department must step in



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Todd Jaime, of Brooklyn, during a rally for independent community control of the NYPD, 3 February 2012, in New York. Photograph: Mary Altaffer/AP

New York City has a very serious problem. Its problem is us: black and Latino males, especially younger black and Latino males of the hip-hop era. You have to wonder if the city actually wants us here. If so, why did the New York Police Department, in 2011, stop, question and frisk a record-breaking 684,330 black and Latino males, with 41% of those "stop-and-frisks" being youth between the ages of 14 and 24?

To understand this total of 684,330, which is an increase of 14% from the 2010 figure, think of it like this: the number of black and Latino males detained by the NYPD in 2011 is more people than the populations of states like North Dakota (672,591), Vermont (625,741), Wyoming (563,626), or America's capital, Washington, DC. (601,723). Or they would be America's 19th largest city, nestled between Detroit, Michigan (717,777) and El Paso, Texas (649,121).

Of those stopped last year, 92% were male and 87% were African American or Latino. In essence, we are demonizing and criminalizing an entire generation of black and Latino teen boys and young men – many of them already mired in poverty, sub-par schools, and limited employment possibilities – for the rest of their lives. And before they even know what hit them.

This is not just a New York problem. This is an American epidemic, a national crisis, where it has become acceptable by local police forces to view black and Latino males in inner cities as criminals first, and as citizens maybe. Politicians who say stop-and-frisk has decreased crime are dead wrong. The New York Civil Liberties Union has been documenting the opposite for years; as has the Center for Constitutional Rights.

I have lived in urban America my entire life and there have always been high levels of

crime, in spite of this particular police practice. Better schools, job opportunities, mentorship programs, and a rapport with these young men that looks first for the best in them, not the worst, is what will decrease anti-social behavior. That's what kept me from a life of crime.

The lucky ones don't get a criminal record, don't get beat up by the police as many have told me occurs (it happened to me in my youth, too), or become so hardened by the nonstop cop encounters that their already-low self-expectations become frozen in time. Yes, in *that* way, there is a direct correlation between the staggering high-school drop-out and incarceration rates of black and Latino young males and the systemic perceptions and reactions to them as menaces to society.

The unlucky ones have names – like [Ramarley Graham, an 18-year-old Bronx black man](#), who was very recently shot by police, unarmed, inside his home as his grandmother watched in horror. Authorities say police mistakenly believed Graham had a gun when he was stopped, then chased him into his second-floor home and killed him in the bathroom. Police say a bag of marijuana was found in Graham's toilet, suggesting he was trying to flush it before gunfire ended his life.

To paraphrase [Dr Zoe Spencer of Virginia State University](#), there appears to be a national disrespect for black and Latino life, especially that of poor black and Latino people. We've heard it in the Republican presidential campaign rhetoric. We see it with the anti-immigration furor in Alabama and all those "illegal immigrant" raids in places like San Diego. These young males subjected to stop-and-frisk feel this reckless disregard for their lives, and it has definitely perpetuated a decades-old tension between urban communities and local police forces, with no relief in site.

To be sure, this is not a call for less policing. All communities need some form of protection and a police-community partnership that is mutually respectful. I sympathize with the difficulties of police work, of the dangers cops face daily. Yet, there is something wrong when my generation of black and Latino males, and the generation before me, and the generation after me, can casually swap tales of being stopped and frisked, at some point in our lives.

That's why the Graham shooting is so indecent and inhumane, [so reminiscent of what happened to an unarmed Sean Bell in 2006](#), because it makes you wonder if the mayor and the New York Police Department are truly capable of dealing with this. Or if they even want to. Since the 1980s, I have witnessed, as journalist and community activist, rhetorical flourishes about changes in police procedure, cultural sensitivity training, and beefed-up community outreach by the NYPD. To be fair, yes, I have seen a greater attentiveness to community relations and a sizeable growth in black, Latino, Asian, and female police officers among the ranks.

But sponsoring a community barbeque or boasting of diversity don't halt bullets from striking unarmed young men like Graham. It seems that even a bill signed into law by New York Governor Andrew Cuomo in 2011, which ostensibly did away with our stop-and-frisk database, is but a tiny step in a very long journey for the civil liberties of America's urban males.

To me, the US Department of Justice needs to take this on now. I gave a speech on Martin Luther King Jr there, in January, and said as much on the issues of racial profiling by police and stop-and-frisk. I noted the great irony of a black man being in the White House even as our nation's police forces and criminal justice system are marginalizing an unfathomable number of black and Latino males.

What the DOJ must do, and what any concerned and humane citizen must push for, is a

top-to-bottom review and transformation of America's police forces. Press conferences and piecemeal attempts are mere Band-Aids for a major systemic problem. Nor can we continue to tout our democratic values to foreign nations when we are not even practicing what we preach when it comes to black and Latino young men in America.

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