

Numbers well-timed for NYPD



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Years ago, a crafty press agent figured the best way to minimize bad news was to release information on a Friday, preferably late in the day, when fewer people were likely to be paying attention. The Saturday papers are small, the thinking went, and stories that run on the weekend are less widely read and have little impact.

It's a neat little trick if you're in the private sector. It's an affront to the citizenry if you work for the people. Yet the New York Police Department continues to do just that with its stop-and-frisk numbers.

Five times now since last February, the NYPD has waited until late on Friday to release its numbers to the City Council. The most recent instance was 10 days ago, when the tally for the final quarter of 2007 was made available.

Clever.

"The police are way less transparent than they could be," says Gene Russianoff, senior attorney for the New York Public Interest Research Group, a good-government organization. "If the police want the public's trust, that means providing information about how they do their jobs — and not giving it out late in the day on a Friday."

KamauFranklin says he's not surprised. As staff attorney for the Center for Constitutional Rights, which recently filed a federal lawsuit accusing the NYPD of racial profiling, Franklin says police are denying New Yorkers their right to know how officers operate on the streets.

"The public should be concerned when an agency with that kind of power is that secrete," Franklin says. "It shouldn't be secretive. It should be as open as possible."

Guidelines for the release of such numbers were laid out in a city law signed in 2001 and in a federal-court case settled by the city in 2004. The NYPD has since complied, though hardly always in a timely manner.

Then, last February, the controversy exploded when the numbers for all of 2006 were issued. Amazingly, 508,540 people had been stopped by police and questioned that year — a more than fivefold increase from the 97,296 people stopped in 2002.

Police attributed the increase to officers being more diligent about filling out the paperwork required whenever someone is stopped and questioned, particularly if that person also was frisked. In addition, they said the department had taken on a number of street-level initiatives that made for a more aggressive force.

More important, the department said it hadn't engaged in any racial profiling of blacks and Hispanics. After all, police pointed out, blacks and Hispanics were stopped roughly the same percentage of time that they had been described by crime victims and witnesses as suspects.

It sounded great, but it was utterly misleading. In 2006, for instance, only 18 percent of all people stopped were because they "fit a relevant description," one of the many reasons for which officers can stop someone.

Police have ignored this discrepancy and have not answered a host of other questions about the issue.

In fact, the next time Police Commissioner Ray Kelly completely explains these numbers will be the first. Instead, he brought in the RAND Corp. to conduct a study — paid for by

the NYPD-friendly Police Foundation — that was generally glowing and found no evidence of racial profiling.

RAND was given the raw data on 2006 stop-and-frisks, the information that more fully explains each stop. After its study was done, the data were given to the University of Michigan, which maintains a national crime data archive. Kelly said on Friday the information soon would be available for all to see, including the 21 criminologists and other academics who are part of a lawsuit asking police to make the same raw data available to them.

The City Council, which also has been asking to see the information, could raise hell about being left out of the mix. Both Speaker Christine Quinn and Councilman Peter Vallone, chairman of the Public Safety Committee, have publicly chastised the NYPD for refusing to hand over the data it freely gave to RAND. But both are big fans of Kelly and have stopped short of any concrete action if the NYPD doesn't budge.

On Friday, Vallone played it straight down the middle.

He promised a fair analysis if given the raw data, but said that as long as the archive is accessible he "wasn't going to cry about it." And he said that while police have nothing to hide, he understands why the department releases the numbers on Friday nights.

"They're human beings," he said, "and the information has been so distorted in the past by irresponsible elected officials and others."

As for what the future holds, Vallone says it's unclear if it will be more of the same, or if the council will be given access to the raw data for 2007 and beyond.

"We're still trying to find out," he said.

