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Stop and Think, Don't Stop and Frisk

Race relations have been a major issue in the United States for hundreds of years. Federal and grass roots efforts to insure equal rights for minorities have succeeded in the broader sense: post-Civil War amendments gave African Americans equal legal status, and the Civil Rights Movement ended overt segregation in the South. These efforts have failed, however, to bring true equality into the daily lives of African Americans and other minority groups, especially when they intersect with law enforcement. As recent events and the subsequent report regarding the law enforcement in Ferguson, Missouri, suggest, police brutality towards African Americans has become one of the most important and defining unresolved problems in U.S. race relations. Police targeting of African Americans in New York City, as a result of the NYPD's stop-and-frisk practices, raise serious concerns over racial profiling, illegal stops, and privacy rights. The NYPD's own reports on its stop-and-frisk activities confirm what many people in communities of color across the city have long known: the police are stopping hundreds of thousands of law abiding New Yorkers every year, and the vast majority are black and Latino. 'Stop-and-frisk' originated in the early 1980s: police officers were told that if they had reasonable suspicion of crime, they had the authority to stop someone and ask questions; the citizen was to be released immediately if the answers yielded no cause for arrest. If, however, police suspected that the citizen possessed a weapon, or if reasonable suspicion of a crime escalated to probable cause, then the citizen would be arrested. The latitude given to police by this policy has resulted in

members of minority groups being deprived of civil rights by invasive questions and physical frisking; it has also contributed to an atmosphere of prejudice and racial tension. The alternative to this discriminatory and adversarial practice is to train New York police to view themselves as serving individuals of *all* races by embedding them in neighborhoods and replacing the 'stop-and-frisk' practice with awareness of the people and their needs.

If stop-and-frisk is eliminated and replaced with the training of police officers to become part of the neighborhoods they serve, we will uphold the principles of justice upon which this nation was built and we will encourage true harmony among races. The criminal justice system, which was created to uphold the laws of the land, should set the 'gold standard' for respecting these laws. When law enforcement employs stop-and-frisk procedures, it invades privacy, ignores civil rights, and engages in discrimination. A culture in which this practice is encouraged is bound to become less sensitive to racial equality. The facts prove that this is the case. Recently in Ferguson, where the stop-and-frisk mentality pervades law enforcement, the police have been targeting the African American population for traffic tickets. In Ferguson, "85 percent of traffic stops from 2012-2014 were of black citizens, who also made up 93 percent of all arrests during that same period." (Desiderio) Even though the city of Ferguson is largely composed of African Americans, this statistic is still shocking: whites seem to be barely represented in the criminal justice system. The recent Justice Department report on law enforcement in the city indicates that police officers in Ferguson do indeed "consistently and systematically [violate] the constitutional rights of the city's residents by engaging in racially discriminatory policing. In addition, police officers reportedly made racist jokes about black people on their official email accounts." (Desiderio) In environments where African Americans can be targeted for questioning and frisking, deep disrespect sets in; racist attitudes become ingrained and are enacted in many ways.

This past summer in New York, police who suspected a black civilian of committing the misdemeanor of selling loose cigarettes put the man in a chokehold which, owing to the man's severe asthma, resulted in his death. "I can't breathe" were the last words this African American spoke. The grand jury declined to indict the officer who used the chokehold, which resulted in protests all around the country and the world. Are cops being trained to distrust the African American population? Even with his peaceful attitude, this civilian was thrown to the ground and choked. Is this justifiable?

Police officers need to think more carefully about what their role actually is: their true role is to be there to protect citizens and not to assume that citizens of certain ethnicities are natural criminals. But is this possible if cops are taught practices that incline them to think in racist terms? It is important to understand that patrol locations can affect a police officer's views on the civilians. A cop who patrols a neighborhood filled with poverty such as Harlem, sees violence and criminal activity such as drug dealing. A NYC crime map can be accessed on the nyc.gov website. Sections of the city are shaded lightest to darkest to represent the level of crime in each neighborhood. Harlem (the 25th precinct) has almost a 50% crime rise than the Upper East Side (the 19th precinct), which is composed of citizens who generally have higher levels of economic opportunity. A cop who thinks that being black accounts for all crime in Harlem will be prone to become racist and potentially abusive; a cop who thinks only in terms of the *perpetrators* of crimes— and who forgets that many citizens of Harlem are *victims* of crime— can too-easily assume that every civilian living in Harlem possesses drugs or is violent. The only way to change such simplistic views of crime is to eliminate simplistic and invasive methods such as stop and frisk and to instead encourage a more meaningful and nuanced relationship with citizens.

Making matters worse is the fact that police behaviors that demonstrate disrespect or even brutality towards a specific group of people are almost *never* likely to induce that group to be more compliant with the law. On the contrary, such behaviors are likely to make that group of people feel isolated, unheard, disregarded, and thus *less* invested in society as a whole. A group singled out for bad treatment becomes prone to distrust traditional forms of justice and to think about using subversive or even coercive power to fulfill its own needs.

After two famous instances of police brutality towards African Americans in the 1990s, a study was conducted to determine how Americans perceived those shameful incidents. The study found that African Americans viewed those instances of police brutality as “reinforcements of their existing perceptions of past racial injustice” (Sigelman et al 790). In other words, African American television viewers, seeing a ‘gang’ of white policemen viciously beating unarmed African Americans, first in Los Angeles and then in Detroit, only became *more* convinced of the “seamlessness of racism in America” (Sigelman et al 790). They sadly viewed the cruelty and racism of a few white cops as representing the continuation of a universal American racist tradition.

If racism towards African Americans is viewed as being an inevitable, inescapable fact of life, then African Americans would certainly have little incentive to accept police authority or to believe in the good will of their white neighbors. Recently, as in the 1990s, African Americans have risen up in defiance of police authority after a nationally publicized incident that was widely perceived as being a case of racial bias. In 1991, Rodney King, an African American, was “brutally beaten on tape by the Los Angeles Police Department” (Chaney, Robertson 484). After the four white officers who were tried

for beating King were acquitted, riots broke out in Los Angeles (Mother Jones). Many Americans of all ethnicities, while disapproving of the riots' violence, could understand why members of Los Angeles' African American community felt the need to take to the streets in this disruptive and damaging manner. These Americans sensed the truth in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who stated, "I think that we've got to see that a riot is the language of the unheard" (Time Magazine online).

After the Baltimore funeral of Freddie Gray, who recently died in police custody under extremely questionable circumstances, riots erupted in the Baltimore African American community. While we decry the violence and loss of property, we can also hear in these riots the echo of Dr. King's words, as we follow the media coverage of the unrest. The riots, as well as being instances of public disorder, can be viewed as the 'language' of frustration and injustice. As the African American lawyer, John Burris, suggested in his book, *Blue vs. Black*, an enormous amount of "damage [can be] wrought by a few cases in which police overreactions to even relatively minor incidents poison the relations between police and the entire community" (Heinline – burris and whitney). While few Americans would condone riots, many can imagine that riots, and not order and harmony, could result from incidents in which cops' ingrained disrespect for members of certain ethnicities result in highly publicized incidents of cruelty or negligence. The police represent society as a whole; if they are viewed as being bigoted and unfair, then society itself is greatly in danger of being poisoned.

To solve the problem, police officers patrolling minority neighborhoods must build relationships with the residents. Building relationships results in trust and honesty between the officers and the civilians; police officers learn that neighborhoods with high crime rates are

composed not merely of criminals, but of decent people who need protection. Chief Jeffrey Blackwell of the Cincinnati Police Force has given important testimony demonstrating that police officers can be trained to think not only in terms of preventing crime, but of being part of the neighborhoods they serve. Blackwell made “improve[ing] community-police relationships” (www.cops.usdoj.gov) a major aim of his police force; as a result, he reports dramatic success in reducing injuries to citizens and police officers and in reducing crime and violence. Blackwell asserts that police who understand the community they serve will neither want nor need to target certain ethnic groups and invade citizens’ privacy. They will instead understand that they are serving communities made up of people who are as deeply human, diverse, and deserving of dignity as the police officers themselves. They will not stop and frisk, but think more carefully.

People who are dismayed by the high crime rates in many American cities might well argue that the law is basically adversarial in nature, and that police officers can never truly become part of the neighborhoods they serve. If we accept this view of the law, then stop and frisk makes sense. If crime control were our only aim, then stopping and frisking anyone who looks even vaguely suspicious would be justifiable. Since young men who are 18 to 24 years old are more likely to commit crimes than people of other ages and genders (Cole et al 26), it might even make sense to target this group. But crime control should not be the sole aim of our police force; as sworn protectors of our laws, police officers should aim not merely to prevent crime and catch criminals, but to do so in accordance with our Constitutional rights and with the ideals of equal justice and the right to privacy which we Americans hold so dear.

Chief Blackwell’s testimony shows that police can both control crime and be true to the principles of fair play that make America great. Blackwell explains that officers who become conversant with the neighborhoods they serve can learn to hear their own “moral voices”

(www.cops. Usdoj.gov) and make better judgments regarding the use of force; they can learn the needs of the people they serve and become better able to discern the differences between criminals, victims, and innocent bystanders. The time has come for change, a change in regard to the civilian and police officer relationship. Stop and Frisk must be abandoned. A greater trust must bloom because with trust comes protection.

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