Stopping stop and frisk

Researchers and South Bronx residents work together to document controversial police tactics.

By Brendan L. Smith

Jackie Yates remembers the fury she felt three years ago when she looked through her South Bronx apartment window and saw police officers harassing her children.

Her two teenage sons and their friends were repeatedly stopped and frisked by New York City officers, even though they were just walking to school or hanging out in a courtyard outside their building, Yates says.

“They’re just walking down the street and get pushed up against a wall and get patted down,” says Yates, who is African-American. “My son said, ‘That’s nothing. That happens all the time.’ Our kids thought this was something that was normal.”

Under the city's stop-and-frisk policy, a police officer who reasonably suspects that a person has committed, is committing or is about to commit a crime can stop, question and possibly frisk that person. New Yorkers have been stopped more than 5 million times since 2002, but nearly nine out of 10 of those stops never resulted in an arrest or citation, according to the New York Civil Liberties Union.

In frustration, Yates and other mothers began monitoring the police from their high-rise apartments, sprinting down the stairs to record (using their phones) officers harassing their children. Then in 2011, Yates saw a flyer recruiting participants for a research project to help document police tactics in
Community resident and co-researcher Jackie Yates, Dr. Brett Stoudt and Dr. Maria Elena Torre are members of the Morris Justice Project that is empowering the neighborhood.
a 42-block section of the South Bronx centered at Morris Avenue near the Yankees baseball stadium. The low-income neighborhood was a "hot spot" with one of the highest rates of police stops in New York City. The Morris Justice Project became an enduring partnership between neighborhood residents and researchers from the Public Science Project and the City University of New York (CUNY).

"We thought it was going to be a six-week project, and it's gone on for more than three years now," says Yates, a nutritionist at a local Head Start program. "Sooner or later, someone is going to hear you and want to help when you start telling your story."

The participatory action research project has involved residents as co-researchers in every stage of the research to gain their input and spotlight needed reforms, says Brett Stoudt, PhD, an assistant professor of psychology at CUNY's John Jay College of Criminal Justice. He leads the project with Maria Elena Torre, PhD, a faculty member in critical psychology at the CUNY Graduate Center and founding director of the Public Science Project.

"The community members are not stakeholders, or people being served by the research, but actual colleagues," says Torre. Community members have helped develop surveys on police tactics, provided input on research findings, attended rallies opposing the stop-and-frisk policy, and participated in presentations at community events and conferences, including APA's Annual Convention in August in Washington, D.C. "Expertise is distributed quite widely, even though the knowledge in the ivory tower is often what gets most validated," Torre says.

"Broken windows"
New York's stop-and-frisk policy was adopted as part of the controversial "broken windows" theory, which argues that more serious crime can be reduced if police crack down on minor infractions, including vandalism and trespassing. Police stops in New York City have skyrocketed over the past decade, peaking at 685,724 stops in 2011, a more than 600 percent increase since 2002.

Of those stopped in 2011, 53 percent were black and 34 percent were Latino. White people accounted for only 9 percent of the stops, even though they make up a third of the city's population. Nearly 90 percent of the stops didn't result in an arrest or citation.

The stop-and-frisk policy has been reined in recently by rulings in a class-action lawsuit and a new city law that installed an inspector general overseeing the police. In 2013, New Yorkers were stopped 191,558 times. In the first half of 2014, that number declined to 27,527 stops.

While its impact on crime has been debated, the stop-

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and-frisk policy has seriously damaged the reputation of the South Bronx police, according to surveys of more than 1,000 South Bronx residents conducted in 2011 by the Morris Justice Project.

Local residents helped design the survey questions, received training in surveying techniques, and hit the streets with researchers to conduct interviews using a systematic grid of locations.

More than two-thirds of the survey respondents reported they had been stopped by police within the past year, often just for standing outside their apartment buildings or in a group on street corners. More than half of the respondents felt that police abused their power, and almost two-thirds said they felt targeted by police because of their age, gender, race, immigration status or sexual orientation.

"You are seeing the next iteration of policing on black and brown people," Stoudt says. "If you think about growing up policed in New York City, it's just a constant presence and a constant assumption of criminality. That type of inference then gets applied to an entire community."

Monitor on Psychology • February 2015
Street-level research

The first meetings of the Morris Justice Project were held in a library basement, with residents paid $10 per hour for their participation. More than a dozen people showed up for the first meeting. Stoudt, who is white, and Torre, who is Hispanic, were outsiders with little connection to the neighborhood.

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After the survey results were analyzed in 2012, the research was presented to the neighborhood in a bold way: During a nighttime rally, drummers gathered a crowd and a giant projection was shown on the façade of a tall apartment building by the illuminator, a Ford van equipped with a video projector. Residents read survey statistics and shared their feelings about the police, just before the police showed up and shut down the event, claiming a permit was needed.

"Having a diverse crowd stand in solidarity made a noticeable difference in how police handled the situation. They arrived with six police vans and left with those six vans empty," Torre says. "Our colleagues from the neighborhood said that was the first time they had ever seen that happen. It mattered that people from outside the neighborhood were there."

During the summer of 2013, the Morris Justice Project hit the streets again for "Sidewalk Science," street-corner presentations that included a free pocket-size summary of the survey results. Residents wrote their thoughts about community safety on a white board and had their photos taken for a Community Safety Wall. Those responses were analyzed for common themes. One boy held a sign that read, "We should take away the guns." A bearded man wearing a Yankees baseball cap wrote, "People smiling, children playing and everyone loving everyone."

“You fit the description”

Paul Bartley, a South Bronx social worker who volunteers with
the Morris Justice Project, has heard many complaints about harassment by police. In 2012, he received a frantic phone call from a client who had just left his office and was stopped a block away. The officers said the man fit the description of a crime suspect, and they told Bartley "to mind my own business and move on, or I would be arrested," he says.

While the police were stuffing his handcuffed client into a police car, Bartley told them he had been with the man for the past hour. After telling the officers he would meet them at the police station, he saw the patrol car stop farther down the block, where his client was let go because there wasn't any evidence to arrest him, Bartley says.

Such incidents have angered residents and made them fear the police, so tips about drug dealing or other crimes have dried up, Bartley says. "Instead of someone calling the police, they might try to handle the situation on their own," he says. "They felt like when the police came, they would make the situation worse."

Bartley, who is African-American, says his warnings about police harassment have become a daily ritual with his son and two daughters, a sentiment echoed by Yates and other African-American residents. He has told his teenage son and two daughters to take an ID with them before leaving home. If police stop them, they should keep their hands out of their pockets and not make sudden movements.

"I believe racism definitely still exists in America," Bartley says. "In some places, it rears its ugly head more than others, and the South Bronx happens to be one of those areas."

Moving ahead

Torre, Stoudt and other project members are preparing their findings for several academic journal articles. The team also is campaigning for more community spaces, including playgrounds and recreation centers where residents can gather without fearing police harassment.

"There's no gym or rec center or summer jobs," Yates says. "When you find there's nothing for a child to do, they tend to make their own fun, and their judgment may be off."

For Yates, the project has "done wonders for me and has enlightened me about a lot of things," she says. "I can wear a lot of hats now. I can be an activist. I can be a poet."

While the number of police stops has declined recently, Yates says more work needs to be done to mend the broken relationship with the police.

"We're not against policing at all, but just like frisk is not solving the problem," she says. "When you keep telling a child that he is bad, then the next thing he is going to tell himself is, 'If you think that way, then I might as well be that way.'"

Brendan L. Smith is a journalist in Washington, D.C.

For more information about the Morris Justice Project, go to http://morrisjustice.org/.