

Police stops skyrocket in New York City

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Statistics released last week by the New York City Police Department (NYPD) indicate a massive intensification of police harassment and arbitrary detentions and searches in the streets of New York.

The so-called “stop-and-frisk” data show that the NYPD forcibly detained and searched more than 508,540 people in 2006. This marks a more than 500 percent increase from the figure of 97,296 reported in 2002. Only 4 percent of those stopped were arrested.

Since 2001, the NYPD, the nation’s largest police force with more than 37,000 officers, has been mandated by city law to release these figures, but has not done so since 2002. An NYPD spokesman blamed this lapse on antiquated technology used in the compiling process.

The figure includes only stops for which the police filled out the appropriate paperwork, a form called a UF-250. It does not include searches of bags and containers in the New York subway systems, which are considered voluntary since a person may decline a search and opt not to ride the subway.

Another telling indicator of the rise of police activity has been the number of complaints about police abuse to the city’s Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB). Complaints filed alleging police misconduct in stops and searches rose from 925 in 2002 to 2,556 in 2006.

Over the past year, the total number of allegations of police abuse of all sorts submitted to the CCRB rose 21.5 percent from 20,624 in 2005 to 25,961 in 2006.

In attributing causes to such a sharp rise in police stops, the media of all political shades have focused exclusively on race and crime. Indeed, it is clear that minorities, especially youth, are targeted in numbers disproportionate to their numbers in the population.

The apologists for the police claim, however, that this is because of the high crime rates among African-Americans and Hispanics. Democratic Party

demagogues such as Rev. Al Sharpton and City Councilman Charles Barron blame an ingrained racism in the police force.

While racism and racial profiling by police officers undoubtedly plays a significant role, these explanations fail to explain such a steep increase in police harassment in so short a time, particularly when there has been no proportionate change in crime levels.

What is missing from any of this media discussion—and this holds true of the liberal press as well as the right wing—is the class character of the stops and the political context in which they occur.

Stop-and-frisk actions occur overwhelmingly in working-class neighborhoods where social conditions are marked by deepening poverty aggravated by the decline of social welfare programs, rising housing costs and a decaying school system.

The *New York Times* reported in June on a study by New York University, which revealed that a housing crisis of sharp proportions faced moderate-income New York families, a group that includes newly hired firefighters, as well as “experienced home health aides, nursing aides, child care workers, bartenders, coffee shop hostesses, tour guides...[t]he researchers found that the number of apartments affordable to households earning about \$32,000 a year, or 80 percent of the median household income in the city, has dropped by 205,000 in just three years.”

A total of 1.5 million New Yorkers have incomes below the poverty line, \$16,600 a year for a family of three. The collective income for this section of the population—nearly 20 percent of the city—is worth less than the wealth of the single richest New Yorker, David H. Koch, who holds an estimated \$12 billion.

The mounting inequality is accompanied by a general hostility and alienation felt by millions of New Yorkers toward the political establishment, in particular to the bipartisan defense of Wall Street and support for the

Iraq and Afghan Wars.

The police murder of Sean Bell has also heightened tensions about the conduct of the police in the city. Bell and two passengers in his car were shot in a hail of bullets in November the night before Bell's wedding. Bell was killed and his passengers critically wounded. None of them was armed.

Tens of thousands of largely minority workers marched to protest the shooting along Fifth Avenue at the height of the Christmas shopping season.

Conditions of social inequality have made social relations in New York City tense and fragile. The instinctive response of the state has been to increase its presence on the streets, significantly eroding the democratic rights of the population and particularly its most oppressed layers.

Like the Patriot Act, the threats to habeas corpus and the panoply of anti-democratic laws instituted by both Democrats and Republicans in Congress, as well as the general demeanor of the Bush Administration, the turn to police-state measures by the New York City elite has been conscious and thought out.

Christopher Dunn, associate legal director of the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU), noted that all of the data on UF-250s are stored on an electronic database. The vast majority of those whose names and addresses are stored have committed no crime; they simply live in working-class neighborhoods subject to police stop-and-frisk sweeps.

"With the huge surge in the number and people who are being stopped and frisked in New York, that there are literally hundreds of thousands of innocent New Yorkers who have ended up in the police department's computer system," Dunn told NY1 News. "We right now don't know what the police are using that database for, but they can track people. Every time they think some crime has happened they may be going out and knocking on the doors of law abiding New Yorkers."

Similar anti-democratic actions can be seen in the city's new ordinance to limit the size of demonstrations. On February 25, the NYPD's new assembly regulations will take effect. These rules will prohibit groups of more than 50 people, cyclists, or cars from assembling without a parade permit. Currently, police permission is not needed when groups of any size assemble on sidewalks or obey traffic laws in the street.

As the NYCLU noted *York* in a piece, a group seeking such a permit "must appear at a police station to answer questions about speakers, topics and likely participants and to negotiate myriad details, including publicity and the precise route, start and end times.... [E]ven with legal representation, organizers often feel that the police, who have virtually complete control over the event, are intimidating and even abusive."

The use of extra-constitutional powers restricting the right to assemble and the escalating police infringement on Fourth Amendment rights that protect individuals from unreasonable search and seizure are symptomatic of a city in which the ruling establishment fears social polarization will translate into social confrontation.



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