

Lingering Questions About 'Stop-and-Frisk'

The New York Police Department says its "stop-and-frisk" program — under which officers investigating crimes, or working to prevent crimes, briefly detain or pat down people on the streets — has played a pivotal role in driving down crime levels to record lows.

But civil rights groups and some criminologists are understandably troubled by new statistics showing that police officers stopped a record 575,000 people last year — nearly 90 percent black or Hispanic — and that the number of stops is growing as crime falls. Instead of dismissing such complaints, the Police Department should re-evaluate the program.

Credible questions about the racial fairness of stop-and-frisk were raised in 1999 in a study released by the state attorney general, then Eliot Spitzer. Conducted by a Columbia University statistician and reviewed by the editor of a reputable journal, it found that the program had disproportionately higher stop rates for blacks and Hispanics. The rates remained elevated even when they were adjusted to take account of higher crime rates and arrest rates in minority neighborhoods.

The Center for Constitutional Rights, which has sued the city, charging it with racial profiling, recently raised similar complaints. In an analysis released last year, it said that police officers used physical force more often against blacks and Hispanics than whites during stops. The group described 2009 as the worst year for the program on record, saying that "heavy-handed policing" in minority neighborhoods was promoting fear of police officers, which makes law enforcement more difficult.

The Police Department says the stops are necessary and that they make up a small fraction of the 23 million contacts that members of the force had with citizens last year. Police officials say minority citizens are more often stopped because many live in high-crime neighborhoods, where officers are often intensively involved in efforts to thwart car thefts, muggings and, especially, shootings. The department points with pride to the fact that the murder rate has reached an all-time low.

But the department's statistics suggest that the stop-and-frisk tactic may be reaching a point of diminishing returns. In 2009, only 1.3 percent of the nearly 600,000 people stopped were caught with weapons. Just 6 percent were arrested. If the number of stops keeps going up — and officers begin to be seen as acting recklessly and unfairly — the department will risk permanently alienating an entire generation of people in the very neighborhoods where trust in the law is most needed.

