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Detroit's New Policing Strategy Is Stop-And-Frisk on a Massive Scale

The Detroit Police Department has come a long way since the days when its cops were the deadliest in America. But the DPD's "broken windows" tactics are just excessive force in another form.

By Allie Gross | Sep 18 2014, 1:56pm



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Detroit's finest. Photo by Laura Goins [via Flickr](#)

On a chilly November morning last year, at least 150 federal, state, and local law enforcement officers swarmed the Colony Arms apartment complex on Detroit's eastside for "Operation Clean Sweep." While the raid was initiated by the Detroit Police Department, back up was considered vital—since January 2013, the department had received an estimated 600 phone calls from residents of the public housing unit who reported a range of illicit activity, from drug activity to assault and gun shootings.

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By the afternoon, 33 people had been arrested, cuffed in zip ties, and loaded onto an electric blue Detroit Police Department bus. The raid was celebrated

and lauded as a success by mainstream media—a PR-coup and reputation boost that DPD desperately needed.

Since 2003, the department had been under the federal oversight of the US Department of Justice, and shaking its bad rap had been proving difficult. After years of articles dissecting the department's **dismal response time, botched raids**, and use of **excessive force**—issues that precipitated the federal intervention—Colony Arms felt like a win, signaling a shift in the public's perception, or at the very least the media's interpretation, of the embattled police department.

"This starts the wave of what the new DPD is all about," Police Chief James Craig, who had been on the job for only four months at the time, **told WXYZ Detroit** after the raid.

Less than a month later, Craig initiated a raid of another public housing complex, in which 42 people were arrested. Two weeks after that, on December 17, some 300 officers and law enforcement agencies flooded one-square-mile-area of the city's west side for "Operation Mistletoe" – a raid that at the time was celebrated for being the biggest in the department's history. And the raids only got bigger. "Operation Restore Order"—as the cumulative initiative was called—launched monthly assaults on the crime-ridden city. By the time I met with Assistant Chief James E. White and Commander DeShaune Sims last week at the Detroit Public Safety Headquarters, the "new DPD" had conducted "nine or ten operations," and, according to White, the was in the process of planning another one.

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From an outside perspective, DPD has come a long way since 2000 when the *Detroit Free Press* published an investigation titled "Detroit Cops are Deadliest in U.S." The department overcame a massive hurdle last month, when a judge

announced the department would begin transitioning out of federal oversight, after 11 years of reporting to the DOJ. The announcement was a recognition of strides that the DPD has made since the DOJ ordered the federal oversight as a result of issues of excessive force, unconstitutional confinement conditions, and the illegal detention of witnesses. Deplorable holding cells have been shut down, new training procedures—including firearms training—have been implemented, and a Civil Rights Integrity Bureau has been created. Between 2009 and 2014, the DPD saw 18 fatal shootings by police officers, down from 48 between 1995 and 2000. But while the question of "deadliest" may be off the table, new questions are arising: What will be the legacy of the "new" DPD? Can excessive force take other forms?

Craig's zero-tolerance policing style goes beyond raids: It is a defining factor in the department's "new" agenda. According to White, who has been with the department for 18 years, the DPD's five main priorities right now are (in no particular order): Homicide reduction, improving response times, graffiti elimination, narcotics enforcement, and vice.

Given the magnitude of Detroit's municipal issues—the city often draws comparisons to war-torn areas like Baghdad and Beirut—it may come as a surprise that police would chose to focus on petty crimes like graffiti and prostitution. But the department sees these seemingly minor issues as "Quality of Life" problems that, if left unchecked, will balloon into far bigger offenses.

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"We go out and do drug raids—that's a quality of life issue. But then we go out to the local party stores in the area and if they are selling loose cigarettes or the store is dirty then they are cited for that as well," White explained. "You have to approach crime almost as a holistic approach, where you have to look at every aspect of the community and what's happening in the community. Some people would laugh and say, what difference does it make if the store is clean? Well, if the store is dirty and there is no investment by that storeowner to have a clean-store that is welcoming to regular, everyday, working class people, then you're

going to draw only the people who may be looking to do what's not necessarily a good thing."

What White has described—targeting "dirty" liquor stores to shutdown other more illicit enterprises—is the practical application of what is known as "broken windows" policing, a theory that was first applied by New York Police Commissioner William Bratton during the Giuliani administration in the 1990s. While the strategy is credited with lowering the city's crime rates, it is also blamed for spawning the "stop-and-frisk" policies that have been criticized for disproportionately targeting and criminalizing minorities.

White and Sims are obviously aware of these connotations. While they had been open and easygoing for most of our interview, they both seemed ill at ease when I mentioned "broken windows."

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"So I just want to clarify with broken windows we don't work with Dr. Kelling," said White, referencing the criminologist and social scientist George Kelling who coined the "broken windows" theory and who has previously been brought in as a consultant for DPD. "We have talked with him, we don't have a team that's on the ground with Dr. Kelling doing broken windows theory enforcement activities."

But while the department's relationship with Kelling may have ended, it is one of various steps Detroit has taken to implement Kelling's ideas about policing. For example, in 2012 and 2013 the DPD partnered with the conservative Manhattan Institute to **test out** "broken windows" strategies in two of the city's high-poverty areas. And prior to coming to Detroit, Craig served under Bratton while the latter was head of the Los Angeles Police Department. (Bratton has since resumed his former position in New York, where he is once again leading the push for "broken windows" policing.)

For Detroit, like New York, "broken windows" has also had a serious downside, particularly for the black community, which makes up 82 percent of Detroit's population. A recent **article** in *The Guardian*, "Bratton-style policing means more fines and arrests for black residents of Detroit," cuts right to the point, arguing that while "broken windows policing," or, as the DPD prefers, "Quality of Life Policing," may make middle-class, mostly-white, young professionals feel better about the city, the policies affect black citizens at disproportionate rates. One could argue, as the Guardian did, that this is the result of racial profiling.

White was quick to shutdown any implications that race factored into the DPD's strategy. "It's not race or gender specific," he told me. "It deals with the issues that have been shown to be problematic in the community." But the reality is that there are bigger, systemic issues that go far beyond racial profiling: Detroit is one of the most **racially segregated** cities in the nation, and the areas pinpointed for "Quality of Life" policing tend to be predominantly black neighborhoods. And in a raid there is very little distinction between who is and is not a criminal. If you live in a "problematic community" than you get treated like a "problematic citizen."

Take for example the same WXYZ Detroit video that featured Craig's comments about the "new DPD." Spliced in between a montage of DPD guns, shiny cop cars, and cuffed men and women there was an interview with a Colony Arms resident named Sharrie Freeman. The general celebratory mood of the report and words below her name "Glad to See Police" make it easy to miss what she is saying. "My door actually got kicked in while I was there with my two year old son," Freeman tells the reporter. She wasn't alone. With police on every floor of the building and guards in front of the elevators, Colony Arms, where 90 percent of residents are black, was "stop-and-frisk" on a massive scale. Everyone was a suspect, everyone's name was run through the system and every violation was treated with zero tolerance.

So who were the people arrested at Colony Arms? Cassandra Grimes is one of them. On Nov. 15, 2013, the mother of three had just returned home from a doctor's appointment and was in the midst of making breakfast when police started banging on the door. Frightened, she woke up her boyfriend Darren Reese-Brown, urging him to hide in the closet. After getting out of prison earlier that year, Reese-Brown had ditched his mandated Supervised Independent Living (SIL) residence to stay with Grimes, and they were both nervous that his slip-up had instigated the unexpected visit.

"What's your name? What's your name?" the police questioned when she finally opened the door. Fearful of repercussions and distrustful of the police, Grimes bit her tongue. The officers were forced to search for their own clues. Her Food Assistance-Bridge Card was sitting on the kitchen table and it didn't take long for the mystery to be solved. "Yep! That's her!" one of them excitedly announced.

Grime's name was repeated into a walkie-talkie, run through the system and within minutes she was being led away. Her crime? Failing to show up to a Warren County court after getting a ticket for marijuana possession.

Grimes spent the next ten hours in Detroit County Jail before being reunited with her boyfriend and children that night. She was 8-and-a-half months pregnant and required medical care upon release.

This experience is common in raid settings, said Mark Jay, the co-founder of the Detroit literary magazine *The Periphery* who co-wrote an **essay** on the raid with Grime's boyfriend Reese-Brown, who he met while teaching a prison creative writing class. The majority of the arrests were for "petty crimes," he claimed, such as outstanding warrants for traffic tickets and possession marijuana. With zero-tolerance, everyone gets lumped together. In fact, according to Jay, all but three of the residents rounded up in the raid and paraded in front of the cameras were released by the following Monday. By then, Colony Arms was back to business as usual, with the bigger issues plaguing the community still largely unaddressed.

"One thing we were trying to talk about in the article is that the police used that there were 600 calls to the building to justify the raid but the fact that they weren't responding to calls in the first place is the reason it got up to 600 calls," Jay explained. "So the police, their inaction is what justifies the raid and then the media says, 'Oh! There are 600 calls, these people are animals, the police have to come in.' But it's like what do you expect people to do? Without the blanket of security from the police you can't still have your moral code."

When I brought up some of these issues to White he seemed surprised.

"I think you're asking a lot of the police officers who were on the raid to discern who— when you talk constitutional policing, the scales of justice, you're blind," White explained. "You have to go in, you have to treat everyone equal. I would venture to say more than 30 people were stopped that day in the Colony Arms. I would venture to say those people that did not have petty crimes or warrants out for their arrest were not arrested. But those people who had missed court appearances, some people had felony warrants, those people were arrested."

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