Introduction

I got a daughter. Luckily I don’t got a son. But what I think it does to little kids coming up—in they mind it becomes regular. Like when they get older, cops stopping them, they gonna remember when they was little they always seen that. It’s not going to be out of the norm for them.

—Lance

In June 2011, I began spending time in the South Bronx, where, as a graduate student in sociology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, I worked as a research assistant for a local community-based research project. It was around this time that media coverage of the New York City Police Department’s stop-and-frisk policy, an approach in which police officers would stop and question residents whose behavior struck them as “suspicious,” began to spike.

This was also the year that frisks, disproportionately effecting black and Latino youth in low-income neighborhoods, would reach their peak, with 685,724 stops documented, in a city with a population of approximately 8.5 million residents. Local newspapers such as the New York Times, the Daily News, and the New York Post, as well as national publications
like the *Atlantic* and the *Wall Street Journal*, had begun covering the phenomenon, thus helping to shape a broader discussion of the subject.

New Yorkers seemed largely divided on the issue. For some residents, the city did indeed feel safer thanks to this approach—a stark contrast to the urban blight associated with parts of the city in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But at what cost, I wondered? The South Bronx neighborhoods in which I was spending time were experiencing some of highest frequencies of stops in New York City,¹ and I became curious as to how peoples’ lives were shaped by this form of aggressive policing.

This curiosity served as the impetus to embark on this research project and begin spending time with local residents in and around parts of the 40th, 42nd, and 44th precincts of the South Bronx, which cover the Melrose, Morrisania, Highbridge, and Concourse Village neighborhoods. Some residents refer to the area as Morris, a reference to the avenue that bisects much of the borough’s southwestern portion. But since the name is not in widespread use, and since neighborhood names in the Bronx can be tricky in any case, I refer to the area, which lies roughly west of Bruckner Boulevard and south of the Cross-Bronx Expressway, as the southwest Bronx or simply as the neighborhood.

Borrowing from the term made popular by the sociologist Robert K. Merton,² I sought to examine the so-called unanticipated consequences of Bloomberg-era stop-and-frisk policing. In areas like the South Bronx, aggressive policing creates yet another unneeded barrier to getting ahead. How,
Figure 1.1. The 40th, 42nd, and 44th Precincts of the New York Police Department. Map courtesy of Will Shaw.
then, do families affected by this tactic manage? Are they able to maintain a sense of community? What is the impact of aggressive policing on residents’ daily lives?

Due to the types of questions being asked, ethnography was the most appropriate approach to my fieldwork. This method is particularly useful when seeking to document the so-called lived experiences of members of such a neighborhood. These were questions that could not be answered in a survey or a brief interview on a college campus. I had to immerse myself in the community—spending time in residents’ apartments or houses, at local gatherings, at pickup basketball games, on park benches, in bodegas, at court hearings, and at meetings with probation officers. And while I had a number of initial research questions in mind when I went into the field, I realized that many of these questions might shift over time. As part of a more “grounded” inductive approach, I was open to allowing my data to inform my hypotheses, as I spent more and more time in the community.³

Because of heightened attention from police, some residents were leery of outsiders in the community. For this reason, it was extremely important for me to spend time familiarizing myself with the neighborhood, and, even more important, for local residents to feel that they could trust me with their stories. Having lived and worked in the Kingsbridge section the Bronx for a time in my early twenties, I had some familiarity with the area. I often visited the neighborhood around Yankee Stadium, sometimes for a ball game but more often for a drink or to meet friends. Later on, I began mentoring high-school students as part of the Bronx
Brotherhood Project, at a local community center near where I began this research. In many ways, however, I was starting from scratch with this endeavor.

It wasn’t until my teens that I began to more fully cultivate my own ideas about the police. Toward the end of middle school in Syracuse, New York, where I grew up, I began noticing how police officers can alter or interrupt people’s lives, particularly the lives of young men of color. Although I grew up in a solidly middle-class household to immigrant parents from India and the Netherlands, my community did not always reflect my own circumstances. Syracuse, a mid-sized “Rust Belt” city, fell on hard times as I was coming of age in the 1980s and 1990s, as many of the factory jobs the city once depended on began to leave. In 2015, the *Atlantic* famously declared that Syracuse had the “highest rates of both black and Hispanic concentrations of poverty in the nation.” By the time I had graduated high school, a number of my peers had negative interactions with police, in some cases resulting in long-term prison sentences. To that end, particular moments still resonate with me and played a key role in my personal, and sometimes complicated, understanding of the police.

Despite my own sometimes negative experiences with law enforcement, I often shy away from being overly critical of the police. For every friend or acquaintance I’ve seen locked up, another has fallen victim to neighborhood violence, ostensibly underscoring the need for effective police work. It is at this critical juncture, the delicate balancing of community safety and fundamental human rights, where the primary dilemma lies.
In some respects, I came into this project selfishly seeking to make sense of what I had seen and experienced in my formative years. I sought to discover how others had themselves come to realize the role of police in their lives and, perhaps more important, how these experiences had shaped their trajectories. I was prepared to encounter a bevy of polarizing opinions, of which there were many.

I was unprepared, however, to discover how many people shared my complicated and occasionally contradictory attitudes toward the police. It just wasn’t that simple. There were times when we shared a “fuck the police” attitude, and other moments when the presence of police brought a sense of calm and security. Moreover, although the criminal justice system is among the more visible prisms through which to view inequality in America, it represents only a small piece of the larger systems at play.

The Southwest Bronx

Many of the statistics typically used to describe communities such as the one I focus on do little justice to the human ecology of the neighborhood. Human, or “community” ecology, loosely defined, refers to the relationship involving people, their material conditions, and the physical space they inhabit. Among some of the Ghanaian immigrants I spent time with, for example, the neighborhood is little more than a place to lay one’s head, and consequently police harassment is often something of an afterthought. For others, like Glenda, the neighborhood represents much more. It is a
place to raise a family as well as a source of memories both fond and painful, the latter prompted largely by her teenage son’s recent interactions with local law enforcement officials. Simply put, the neighborhood means different things to different people.

In many respects, the South Bronx of today is a far cry from the “Boogie Down”7 of old. In the late 20th century, the area stood as a global symbol of urban blight, made infamous internationally by President Jimmy Carter’s “walk down Charlotte Street” and by films such as Fort Apache, the Bronx.8 Modern developments now stand where burnt-down buildings and decaying tenements once reigned. The neighborhood on which I focus is no exception, as it quite literally sits in the shadow of the recently renovated courthouse on 161st Street as well as the newly rebuilt, multibillion-dollar Yankee Stadium just blocks away.

Although in some respects this section of the Bronx is similar to many New York neighborhoods, a few important markers distinguish it from other communities. As academics such as the Harvard sociologist Mario Luis Small have cautioned, it is important not to cast poor urban neighborhoods as a monolith.9 While parts of this neighborhood lack the desolate feel (as seen through a scarcity of stores and other businesses) that characterizes certain sections of Brownsville, Brooklyn, for example, it would be hard to compare 161st Street with more vibrant commercial districts such as 125th Street in Harlem or even Fordham Road to the north. Moreover, unlike a number of other high-need communities in New York City, the neighborhood is home to an
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extremely diverse population, spurred on, in large part, by its growing immigrant base.

Perhaps the most influential transformation of Bronx life in the 20th century, however, came in the form of a seven-mile stretch of superhighway. Built over nearly three decades beginning in the late 1940s, the Cross-Bronx Expressway bulldozed its way through large swaths of the borough, disrupting and sometimes destroying entire neighborhoods. The highway quite literally divided the borough, cordonning off the South Bronx from the neighborhoods to the north.¹⁰

Around this same time, the labor market in New York City began to experience profound changes that would have a substantial impact on poorer neighborhoods. Although more closely associated with “Rust Belt” cities like Detroit, Buffalo,
and Pittsburgh, rapid deindustrialization had a substantial impact on New York starting in the mid-20th century. Bronx residents, like their counterparts elsewhere in the city, could no longer depend on stable and well-paying union jobs to help support their families and ease them into the middle class.

This shift took a devastating toll on the South Bronx, one exacerbated by resistance by City Hall and other public and private entities to investing money or other resources in the area. The South Bronx, it seemed, was the subject of financial quarantine. Possibly for this reason, the area has largely been able to resist gentrification in a way that other neighborhoods with affordable rents and proximity to Midtown and Lower Manhattan have been unable to, such as the Clinton Hill/Fort Greene/Bedford-Stuyvesant sections of Brooklyn and Harlem in Manhattan.

For various reasons, the community has managed to maintain much of its black and Latino identity. As of 2010, approximately 46 percent of residents identify as black or African American, and 59 percent as Latino of any race. In the early 20th century, the borough was a destination for Italian, Irish, and Jewish immigrants who sought to escape the relative chaos of Manhattan and make better lives for themselves and their children. Decades later, as white flight accelerated, black southerners and West Indians began settling in northern Manhattan and the Bronx. Additionally, the Puerto Rican population of the Bronx experienced tremendous growth in the years following the passage of the Jones-Shafroth Act in 1917, which effectively granted Puerto
Ricans (a limited form of) American citizenship. Although there was steady growth in the Puerto Rican population in New York City in the years following this legislation, migration began to surge during the post–World War II boom.

In recent years, parts of the South Bronx have maintained a reputation as a destination for a wide variety of immigrant groups from around the world. The Concourse Village area in the 44th Precinct, for example, is among the city’s fastest growing immigrant communities, with approximately 41,748 foreign-born residents, or nearly 41 percent of the area’s total population. Each block, it seems, maintains its own distinctive character, with the sounds and smells varying depending on exactly where you are—even on which side of the block you stand. Walking down Morris Avenue, for example, one can see English slowly give way to Arabic signage on storefronts, only to shift again to Spanish-only advertisements for a party or other event. This is part of the cultural complexity of the Bronx, blending its rich Jewish, Italian, African American, and Puerto Rican histories with those of relative newcomers from countries like Ghana, Bangladesh, Guinea, and the Dominican Republic.

Near Yankee Stadium, on West 161st Street near River Avenue, one can find a number of bars, restaurants, and shops peddling Yankees-related gear. Passing Joyce Kilmer Park toward the Grand Concourse to the east, these businesses give way to a flurry of signs advertising legal services and bail bondsmen. The area is home to the New York State Division of Parole, the New York City Department of Probation, the
Bronx District Attorney’s office, as well as a cluster of courthouses, the most visible being the Bronx Hall of Justice.

The huge, steel-framed structure, which opened in 2007 and sits a few blocks east of the Grand Concourse, occupies nearly two square blocks in the heart of the neighborhood. Although sought-after semipublic space is located near the rear of the building, the mere presence of the courthouse provides a constant and unsettling reminder of where one can end up.

Concourse Plaza, which is connected on one side to the Department of Probation, is the host of a Food Bazaar, one of the more prominent grocery stores in the area, as well as to a movie theater. Buildings in the rest of the plaza have begun to deteriorate, as clothing and electronics stores have gradually shut down, with signs advertising the promise of redevelopment prominently displayed over boarded-up doors.

For local residents, 161st Street serves as something of an informal dividing line. Directly to the south are several housing projects operated by the New York City Housing Authority, specifically Melrose Houses, Jackson Houses, and Morrisania Air Rights Houses. To the north are private apartment buildings and row houses. Most residents use the street as the landmark of choice when giving directions or describing a scene. In addition, many of the young adults I spent time with police their own movements according to their geography in relation to 161st Street, sometimes refusing to travel north or south of the boundary, depending on their orientation.
Further south, parts of the 40th Precinct, in the southernmost part of the Bronx, have become something of a new frontier for real estate developers. In 2015, a sign near the Third Avenue Bridge proclaimed, much to the surprise of long-term residents, that the area was now the “Piano District,” a destination for “world-class dining, fashion, art, and architecture.”

While this vision may still be a few years away, areas like the Hub, near 149th Street and Third Avenue, remain a vibrant commercial district. The Hub, sometimes referred to as the “Times Square of the Bronx,” has maintained an eclectic mix of retail chains and street vendors. Nonetheless, this part of the Bronx at times serves as a reminder of the borough’s gritty past. As recently as 2016, the New York Times
began running a monthly series of articles titled “Murder in the 4–0,” examining how homicide has persisted in the 40th Precinct, which encompasses the Hub, despite a downward trend of homicides citywide.

Historically, the South Bronx’s 16th Congressional District, home to the western portion of the neighborhood, has been one of the poorest in the nation. In the Concourse Village section, where a number of the people I interviewed live, about 36.5 percent of residents live below the poverty line. This figure increases to 50.3 percent among those 18 and younger. Fewer than 15 percent of residents (14.2%) age 25 or older have at least a bachelor’s degree. To put these numbers in perspective, along affluent Central Park West in Manhattan, less than 20 minutes away, about 7 percent of residents fall below the poverty line while nearly 77 percent have at least a bachelor’s degree.

Sociologists such as William Julius Wilson regard communities like this as symbols of social isolation—areas in which residential segregation effectively works to concentrate economic disadvantage. Over the years, a number of sociological studies have focused attention on these communities. As many recent ethnographers have illustrated, in countless American communities the common denominator has been an intersecting web of blocked opportunities. These exclusionary practices manifest themselves in myriad ways, although in 2018 the most visible form seems to be a criminal justice system that monitors and incarcerates poor blacks and Latinos at an alarming rate.
The New York Police Department

Since its founding in 1845, the New York Police Department has undergone a series of noteworthy transitions and ideological shifts. The department itself is divided into 77 precincts (12 of them in the Bronx) stretching across New York City’s five boroughs and including specialized units such as the Transit Bureau, which focuses on the city’s extensive mass transportation system, and the Housing Bureau, which polices New York City Housing Authority buildings. Some 36,000 officers hold a number of positions ranging from posts in the department’s investigative units to administrative jobs at One Police Plaza, the department’s headquarters in Lower Manhattan. During my research, approximately 42 percent of uniformed officers identified as black or Latino.19

Of course, the most visible arm of the New York Police Department is its patrol unit. This is typically the entry point for New York’s police officers, and it is these men and women who often serve as the face of the department.

In the decades leading up to the increasing reliance on stop and frisk as a law-enforcement tactic, several important events transformed the department. The late 1960s and early 1970s were marked by corruption scandals culminating in the establishment, by Mayor John Lindsay, of the Knapp Commission, a task force that sought to implement a more rigorous system of checks and balances and to create a greater sense of accountability among officers.

By the mid-1970s, New York City found itself on the verge of bankruptcy. The city began to cut corners where it could,
letting go of some recent Police Department hires and freezing any new hires. As the city began to rebound in the early 1980s, the department hired more than 12,000 new officers, many of whom did not undergo thorough background checks.\textsuperscript{20}

In the early 1990s, yet another series of allegations of police misconduct ultimately led Mayor David Dinkins to create what was known as the Mollen Commission. Its findings revealed startling levels of brutality and exploitation. In the 75th Precinct in Brooklyn, for instance, police officer Michael Dowd and others were found to have committed crimes such as robbery and drug-dealing, with more senior officers often ignoring or failing to investigate allegations. As a 1993 article in the \textit{New York Times} concluded, “The New York City Police Department had failed at every level to uproot corruption and had instead tolerated a culture that fostered misconduct and concealed lawlessness by police officers.”\textsuperscript{21}

As the public’s faith in the Police Department continued to ebb, crime increased steadily in the 1980s through the early 1990s, the peak of the crack epidemic. In 1994, determined to rehabilitate the department’s tarnished image, newly elected Mayor Rudolph Giuliani appointed William Bratton as police commissioner. After a stint as chief of the New York City Transit Police in the early 1990s, Bratton was selected to be commissioner of the Boston Police Department, only to be lured back to New York in 1994. Upon returning to the city, Bratton declared that “the entire culture of the New York City Police Department needed to be transformed.”\textsuperscript{22}

Mayor Giuliani’s predecessor, David Dinkins, along with Police Commissioner Ray Kelly, had championed a “Safe
Streets, Safe City” program that emphasized community policing. Though appreciative of the infusion of new police force hires that accompanied this initiative, Bratton viewed their approach as largely ineffective.23 As he wrote in his 1998 book, Turnaround: How America’s Top Cop Reversed the Crime Epidemic, written with Peter Knobler:

In theory, that’s fine; beat cops are important in maintaining contact with the public and offering them a sense of security. They can identify the community’s concerns and sometimes prevent crime simply by their visibility. Giving cops more individual power to make decisions is a good idea. But the community-policing plan as it was originally focused was not going to work because there was no focus on crime.

The connection between having more cops on the street and the crime rate falling was implicit. There was no plan to deploy these officers in specifically hard-hit areas (to win political support for “Safe Streets,” Dinkins had to commit to deploying cops throughout the city, in both low- and high-crime areas), and there was no concrete means by which they were supposed to address crime when they got there. They were simply supposed to go out on their beats and somehow improve their communities.24

As part of his response to the city’s crime problems, Bratton implemented a multitiered approach designed to transform the police force. His focus was on getting illegal guns off the street, implementing a data-driven approach to policing, and renewing the focus on lower-level crime and social
disorder. The highly publicized and frequently replicated “CompStat” (short for COMPuter STATistics/COMParative STATistics) system, developed by Bratton and Jack Maple, one of his chief lieutenants, was a management tool that used up-to-date crime statistics to help identify patterns and target areas for officers.

Perhaps most notably, Bratton implemented a form of what was known as broken-windows policing (also known as order maintenance policing or “OMP”), a strategy based on the idea that focusing on smaller quality-of-life offenses such as fare evasion (“turnstile jumping”) and open-container violations (drinking alcohol in public) will lead to a decrease in more serious crimes. This approach served as the ideological precursor to the stop-and-frisk policing that would define the next several decades.

As part of the metrics-driven policing ushered in by Bratton and Maple, the Police Department recorded street stops using a form known as the UF-250. This document, which has been slightly modified over the years, includes a range of data including personal information (name, age, gender, race), location and reason for the stop, and an indication of whether force was used during the encounter. Regardless of whether an arrest was made or a summons issued, UF-250s came to signify an officer’s productivity in the field.

It wasn’t until 2003, however, that stop-and-frisk data became more publicly available. That year, the court decision Daniels, et al. v. City of New York, which alleged that department officers selectively targeted residents based on race, required the New York Police Department to provide quarterly
data on stops—creating a level of transparency that would ultimately inform future cases.

In his 2005 memoir, *Blue Blood*, police officer Edward Conlon, who worked in and around the 40th, 42nd, and 44th Precincts of the South Bronx in the mid-1990s, praised some of the early effects of this policy that he witnessed after joining the force:

The frequency of these “Stop and Frisk” encounters also changed the culture of how criminals carried their weapons: in the 1980’s and early 1990’s, many dealers would carry guns in their waistbands, and the decision to shoot someone—because he crossed into their territory, or he said something about their mother, or he looked at them funny, or just because—was a three-second decision. After Bratton, the dealers still had guns, but they were hidden under their beds or on rooftops, and the delay from impulse to act took five minutes or ten, allowing people to move and tempers to cool.27

Stop and frisk was beginning to capture the public imagination. Even after Bratton left the Police Department in 1996, the tactic was already deeply embedded there. Under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Ray Kelly resumed his role as commissioner of the department in 2002 (in the early 1990s, he had enjoyed a two-year stint under Dinkins). Just months earlier, on September 11, 2001, New York City had been devastated by the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. Upon assuming office, Kelly sought, among other things, to establish a Counterterrorism Bureau and incorporate counterterror-
ism training for all Police Department employees. This resulted in an increasingly militarized police force that was still committed to the principles of stop and frisk.

Under Kelly’s watch, these stops escalated to a peak of 685,724 in 2011, and the public began to take notice. Pockets of resistance to the practice began to develop, and a vocal minority started voicing concerns about the racial disparities that defined this approach. Nevertheless, Kelly was unwavering in his support of the practice. “What bothered me,” he wrote, “what still bothers me—is that the stop-and-frisk controversy managed to undermine a valuable, appropriate, and legal—let me emphasize legal—tool of modern law enforcement, one that had helped to save literally thousands of innocent lives.”

In November 2013, Bill de Blasio was elected mayor of New York. De Blasio, who had openly boasted about his politically activist past during his campaign, represented for many New Yorkers a welcome breath of fresh air, a radical departure from the bottom-line approach that became the hallmark of his predecessor, Michael Bloomberg.

One of de Blasio’s first orders of business was appointing a new police chief to lead the nation’s largest police force, fulfilling a promise he had based much of his campaign upon and one that, many hoped, would mark an end to the highly controversial practice of stop and frisk. In the end, as had happened nearly two decades earlier, William Bratton was ultimately chosen to succeed Ray Kelly.

This was a resounding “humility check” for many who were expecting the previous momentum against stop and
frisk to continue. Starting in January 2013, Federal District Court judge Shira Scheindlin ruled on a series of cases involving New York City residents’ right to public (and sometimes private) spaces. On January 8, in *Ligon v. City of New York*, Judge Scheindlin ordered the Police Department to immediately end the practice of unlawful trespass stops outside so-called Clean Halls buildings in the Bronx. Operation Clean Halls allowed the Police Department to patrol private buildings throughout the city, and, in many cases, residents were subject to arrest in their own buildings if they did not present proper identification.

The most notable court decision came in August 2013, in the landmark *Floyd, et al. v. City of New York, et al.* case. Here, Scheindlin ruled that the rights of thousands of black and Latino New Yorkers had been violated by current stop-and-frisk tactics, calling for an independent monitor to be appointed. Around the same time, Scheindlin also granted the *Davis v. City of New York* case what is known as class-action status, thus allowing other cases to be included and become so-called class members in the lawsuit, which challenged the use of discriminatory stops in Housing Authority buildings.

Many of these milestone decisions coincided with and were perhaps motivated, at least in part, by a series of horrific events involving New York City residents and the police force. In 1999, the murder by police of Amadou Diallo, an unarmed 22-year-old Guinean immigrant, in the Soundview section of the Bronx, sparked significant media attention and
would later prove to be the impetus for the Daniels lawsuit. Seven years later, in 2006, the death of 23-year-old Sean Bell, an African-American Queens native, struck a similar chord.

The murders of two New York teenagers, Ramarley Graham in 2012 and Kimani Gray in 2013, provide still more recent examples of the sharp disconnect between police and communities of color. Graham’s case was particularly startling as he was murdered in his family’s Bronx apartment, unarmed, at the age of 18. Officer Richard Haste, who was charged with manslaughter, was ultimately acquitted of all charges.

In the summer of 2014, just a few months into Bratton’s tenure, the death of Staten Island resident Eric Garner led to a universal rallying cry for the transformation of policing in New York City. Garner, 43, was suspected of selling loose cigarettes, or “loosies,” in the street. When confronted by the Police Department, one of the officers put him in a chokehold.

Garner repeatedly told the officers “I can’t breathe” before losing consciousness. He was pronounced dead later that day, and the entire episode was caught on film that went viral instantly. A few months later, in December, a grand jury declined to indict the officer who had imposed the chokehold. This proved to be a tipping point as thousands of protesters took to the streets in New York City and beyond. “Black Lives Matter” became a rallying cry, drawing national attention not only to the Garner case but also to the larger issues surrounding the deep-seated mistrust between police and minority communities.
Unequal Policing

Recent data suggest that the 40th, 42nd, and 44th Precincts of the Bronx, and New York City on the whole, have become safer in recent years. In his 2006 book, *Downsizing Prisons: How to Reduce Crime and End Mass Incarceration*, the sociologist and former New York City corrections commissioner Michael Jacobson cites New York as one of the first cities that, counter to national trends, effectively decreased prison use while simultaneously lowering the crime rate. The Police Department’s CompStat data support this claim. In the 44th Precinct, for instance, offenses such as burglary and rape have decreased, reportedly by more than 40 percent each between 2001 and 2015, and the murder rate has decreased by 64.5 percent during this period. The aggressive use of “stop, question, and frisk” in communities deemed “high crime” was mandated by several directives issued by the NYPD from the mid-to-late 1990s through roughly 2014. Yet departmental statistics gathered over the last 20 years confirm that assessments of suspicious behavior are highly discretionary and prone to a considerable margin of error. In New York State, a 1964 piece of legislation (Code Crim. Pro. 180-a) gave law enforcement the authority to “stop, question, and frisk” an individual without a warrant based solely upon “reasonable suspicion” that he or she has committed or might be in the process of committing a crime. This statute marked a notable change from prior legal standards that required officers to have a higher level of proof of potential criminality (probable cause) before stopping a member of the public.
In 1968, along with its landmark decision in *Terry v. Ohio,* the United States Supreme Court considered two New York City cases arising under this legislation. In *Sibron v. New York,* the Court ruled in favor of the defendant, and against the validity of an NYPD officer’s use of “stop, question, and frisk.” In *Peters v. New York,* the Court ruled in favor of the state—affirming the officer’s right to stop the defendant based on a reasonable suspicion that he was involved in criminal behavior. The *Terry* decision validated “reasonable suspicion” stops as an acceptable police practice across the nation. At the time the New York legislation passed, and in a powerful dissent to *Terry v. Ohio,* civil libertarians and defense attorneys expressed concerns about how this expanded police authority might be used.

Scholars like Bernard Harcourt and Tracey Meares note that due to the socioeconomic and racial discrimination that often accompanies this type of discretion, the costs of policing are unequally distributed throughout society. African American adolescent males from economically disadvantaged areas, in particular, often feel targeted by police regardless of their involvement in delinquent behavior.

To help explain why this happens, some psychologists point to a phenomenon known as “implicit bias,” whereby unconscious attitudes and stereotypes permeate one’s actions. Put simply, officers who may not be overtly racist may still hold subconscious racial biases, which in turn affect who they decide to stop. For young black and Latino men in the southwest Bronx, this means there is often a presumption of guilt. Moreover, America continues to be intentional with its
policies that have, in no uncertain terms, targeted particular groups. This is not a new phenomenon. Rather, this history of criminalizing race, as noted scholars such as Michele Alexander, Khalil Muhammad, and more recently, Paul Butler, have illustrated, can be traced back centuries.

In a study published in 2007, Andrew Gelman, Jeffrey Fagan, and Alex Kiss found that black and Latino New Yorkers were disproportionately stopped and frisked, and “more frequently than whites, even after controlling for precinct variability and race-specific estimates of crime participation.” The study also showed that among blacks and Latinos, these stops were actually less likely to lead to arrest than with whites.

Data from the Police Department’s Stop, Question and Frisk Report Database, which is available to the public, demonstrate steady increases in documented stop and frisks in the 2000s. Yet only a small fraction of these stops (less than 12% in most years) resulted in a summons or an arrest. For those arrested or issued a summons in the Bronx, the problems were likely just beginning. The borough has developed an unsavory reputation as having a tremendous backlog of cases, resulting in sometimes excruciatingly long court delays. People accused of lower-level offenses often spend a considerable amount of time making arrangements for tending to work and family responsibilities in order to attend court proceedings, only to have the case postponed to another date.

For those accused of higher-level offenses, the situation gets worse. In 2013, when this research took place, the Bronx...
led the city in having the most felony cases pending for two years or more. For those who were denied or could not afford bail, this translates to their being detained on Rikers Island, New York City’s jail, until their court date, which in some cases could be years away. The human cost of an inefficient court system is vividly demonstrated by the travails of a young Bronx resident named Kalief Browder. Browder was arrested at the age of 16 and detained for more than two years, much of which was spent in solitary confinement, on robbery charges that were ultimately dismissed. In 2015, a few years after his release, unable to escape the trauma of his incarceration, Browder committed suicide.

In 2007, there were a reported 472,096 stops in the city. By 2011, stops increased to a peak of 685,724. In 2015, stops declined to 22,565, due largely to the 2013 *Floyd v. New York* decision. Yet even as documented frisks began to decline to presurge numbers, the crime rate continued to decrease. In 2011, for instance, a year marked by a historically high number of stops, there were 515 murders citywide. In 2015, that number had dipped to 352, thus seemingly bolstering the argument against the overuse of the tactic (see table on the following page). Still, the impact of these stops is still felt on both the individual and community level. Those stopped over this period were overwhelmingly male and predominantly people of color; in 2015, approximately 83 percent of those stopped identified as either black or Latino.

Politicians continue to place a substantial amount of the responsibility for crime reduction on street-level policing. Yet, for so many, the decrease in crime does not necessarily
Figure 1.4. New York City Murders, 2002–2016. Source: New York Police Department, 2017.
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>22,565</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>12,404</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1.5. NYPD stop and frisks, 2002–2016. Source: New York Civil Liberties Union, 2017.
translate to greater community safety. Rather, in many cases, police have done nothing more than add an additional layer of community insecurity, with the effects often lasting far longer than the actual encounter.46

In the southwest Bronx, it is easy to see how pervasive and influential the criminal justice system has been for its residents. For countless young people in the neighborhood, negative encounters with the police have become a rite of passage. To borrow from the words of the eminent sociologist Max Weber, the aggressive policing tactics adopted by the New York police are yet another form of the state’s “monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.”47

The current system is seen as one which works to “manage” those on the “margins” of society—in other words, the poor, immigrants, single mothers, stigmatized minority groups, and the formerly incarcerated.48 While what the sociologist Elijah Anderson49 described as more “street-oriented” youth often become intimately acquainted with the criminal justice system at an early age, other local residents remain fully outside of its realm. This is no accident. Rather, as my findings suggest, many residents have developed a keen, localized sense of how to navigate their everyday lives in the face of aggressive policing tactics.
Neighborhood Effects

On the ground, scholars like Mary Patillo, David Weiman, and Bruce Western argue for a more holistic understanding of the criminal justice system and its effects on family and the community. Beyond mere latent consequences of mass incarceration, the criminologist Todd Clear urges us to understand mass incarceration as having a profound impact on what he describes as “destabilizing communities.” Specifically, he seeks to look beyond the consequences for the individual to explore the impact for the community—tearing families apart, eroding the community’s economic strength, and weakening informal social control mechanisms.

In her 10-plus years of fieldwork in the Bronx, the journalist Adrian Nicole LeBlanc illustrated many of the deleterious effects incarceration can have on a family over generations as the revolving doors of jail and prison dramatically alter the relationships and bonds created with both family and friends. In this book, I argue that aggressive policing, regardless of whether it results in incarceration, can have a similarly transformative effect.

As men and women born in the early to mid-1990s, many of the young adults I spent time with find that they have inherited the devastation of the “crack generation.” They are the daughters, sons, nieces, and nephews of a generation that, in large part, was systematically removed from society as part of the “War on Drugs” that defined the years under Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton.
While this crusade had limited effects on crime, it effectively worked to incarcerate a disproportionate number of young black men in inner-city communities across America. As the sociologist Bruce Western puts it, “Young minority men with little education bore the brunt of deindustrialization in the inner cities and experienced the largest increases in incarceration.” Further illustrating this phenomenon, a Pew report famously declared that 1 in every 36 Latino men 18 and older, and 1 in 9 African-American males between 20 and 34, are currently behind bars.

For the young men and women on College Avenue, this often translated to the loss of a father, uncle, neighbor, or friend to the criminal justice system. And while many of these young people have not and likely will never experience long-term incarceration, as members of the previous generation did, they are all too familiar with its consequences. Herein lies a primary distinction. While past generations experienced the ill effects of mass incarceration, present-day black and Latino youth in New York City are subject to a form of widespread harassment. While this is considered progress in some circles, as many of these police interactions result in nothing more than a ticket, the aggregate effect of this form of aggressive policing can be just as insidious.

Searching for a Place to Stand

For young adults in the southwest Bronx, there is a pronounced shortage of places in the area to socialize or pass time. Local residents, particularly young men, are losing
their right to the city. The public parks, stoops, streets, and corners once emphasized by social scientists as spaces to congregate and create meaningful associations are no longer available to members of the community.

Nowhere is this issue more critical than in a place like New York City, where space is at a premium. In densely developed neighborhoods in which a person can easily go stir-crazy in a cramped apartment during the hot summer months, New Yorkers increasingly rely on these public spaces as an escape. Yet instead of allowing residents in areas like the southwest Bronx to enjoy nearby public areas, an increased police presence has only helped deepen the wedges between local residents, thus hastening neighborhood disintegration. Perhaps more than any individual horror story or tale of distress, this is the most devastating, and most enduring, effect of the Police Department’s pervasive use of stop-and-frisk tactics.

Among other negative outcomes, stop and frisk has also helped to intensify a greater culture of mistrust among residents of a “system” they have grown weary of. This has very real consequences, as local residents are far less likely to comply with a police force they view as unjust and not having their best interests in mind. Although a somewhat unorthodox source, I found a particularly telling excerpt in Decoded, the 2010 memoir of the music mogul Jay-Z, in which the rapper speaks to a weariness experienced by so many on the margins:

Poor people in general have a twisted relationship with the government. We’re aware of the government from the time
we’re born. We live in government-funded housing and work government jobs. We have family and friends spending time in the ultimate public housing, prison. We grow up knowing people who pay for everything with little plastic cards—Medicare cards for checkups, EBT [Electronic Benefit Transfer] cards for food. We know what AFDC and WIC stand for and we stand for hours waiting for bricks of government cheese. The first and fifteenth of each month are times of peak economic activity.

We get to know all kinds of government agencies not because of civics class, but because they actually visit our houses and sit up on our couches asking questions. From the time we’re small children we go to public schools that tell us all we need to know about what the government thinks of us.

For a disproportionate number of young adults in the neighborhood, police are one of the first ways they are introduced to the government. As Michael Lipsky notes in his seminal work, Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services, “Most citizens encounter government (if they encounter it at all) not through letters to congressmen or by attendance at school board meetings but through their teachers and their children’s teachers and through the policeman on the corner or in the patrol car.” Acting as an extension of the state, he continues, police are expected to “convey expectations [about] behavior and authority.”

How does this translate to neighborhood residents who are continually stopped for no other reason than the color of
their skin and the neighborhood they live in? As I shall show, this form of aggressive policing affects one’s sense of agency, eroding faith in both local and state institutions. Moreover, this policing regime actively discourages the formation of social ties in the neighborhood—the very networks often needed to get ahead.

A Note on Methodology

In working on *No Place on the Corner*, I was able to develop relationships and build rapport with four primary groups: achievement-oriented young adults, young adults involved in the criminal justice system, local parents, and recent immigrants (1.5 and second generation included). I settled on these delineations after spending extensive time in the neighborhood. Although it is an imperfect classification system in some respects, these became the most logical subgroups for my analysis. Still, seeing as we all occupy different roles in our day-to-day lives, these distinctions were far from “clean.” For instance, some of my contacts who were recent immigrants also may have been justice-involved or achievement-oriented, or both. They were consequently grouped by which identity I felt trumped the others and was most useful for my analysis.

While these categories do not fully embrace the rich diversity of the neighborhood, each group contributes to a better understanding of both the shared and divergent experiences of people living in the area, capturing the everyday realities of a cross-section of the community across
race, gender, age, socioeconomic status, and immigration status. Sensationalized accounts of poor neighborhoods often fixate on the lives of those involved in underground economies like the drug trade, making it easy to conclude that these neighborhoods are nothing more than penal colonies. Spending even a little time in the southwest Bronx, it becomes clear that this couldn’t be further from the truth. During my fieldwork, I spent time with a number of young men who are involved in the criminal justice system. But while these young men are certainly a part of the human ecology of the neighborhood, they are also, in many ways, outliers. Most of the people I met are hard-working men and women trying to get ahead and make better lives for themselves. Due to their busy schedules—juggling work, school, and other appointments—they often become less visible in the neighborhood. Moreover, as my findings support, these residents are often driven further indoors due to neighborhood conflict and an overactive police force. Although they are probably less likely to be found socializing by the bodega on a Saturday afternoon, they are still an integral part of the community’s story.

I began exploring this subject with only a rough idea of which people I wanted to include in my analysis. Over time, the subgroups mentioned began to materialize, and I found myself zigzagging across the 40th, 42nd, and 44th precincts. Because this project took on the form of a somewhat comparative ethnography, my geography in the neighborhood often felt scattered. Different groups spent time in different areas. When spending time with some of the more “achievement-
oriented” young adults, I might visit the after-school college-preparatory center or shoot hoops at the Big Apple summer league. In the case of some of the young adults involved in the criminal justice system, I might meet them at a probation check-in or just hang out with them at their apartment. In all cases, the things we did and the space we occupied varied greatly depending on the individual. This ultimately contributed a great deal to my analysis, as I was given additional insight into how people’s pieces of the neighborhood were reshaped by police tactics.

Moreover, as I soon discovered, my relationships with certain community members often precluded me from associating with other residents. Most notably, my ties with area mothers and fathers occasionally prevented me from talking to their children. While strict confidentiality was preserved throughout the study, some young people were still cautious of the hypothetical risk that information could be shared with their parents. Although this initially frustrated me, I came to empathize with the young adults. After all, what teen really wants to run the risk of their mother and father knowing their business?

In doing ethnography, you often are allowed into people’s “backstage”\(^6\)—the parts of their lives that the rest of the world may not ordinarily get to see. While this often provides for rich ethnographic data, folks occasionally take issue with how parts of their stories are represented. This is perhaps one of the greatest challenges of doing ethnography, but, unfortunately, it is one that is unavoidable. Given the topic of this book, I took particular care to change any identifying
information in order to preserve the anonymity of those involved. Names, some locations, and other personal information were altered for the sake of privacy, although I went to great lengths to keep the character of the community intact. I am deeply thankful to the men and women whose stories fill these pages, who after a long shift at work, or lengthy exam, would find time to meet with me, even when it was the last thing on their mind. Without their participation and commitment, this project would not exist.