

One year after Eric Garner's death, a search for path out of 'police-community hostility'

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By Harry Bruinius
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New York — On a muggy, midweek evening in early July, about 700 police officers, just a week on the job, gathered at the famed Apollo Theater in Harlem, ready to watch a candid onstage conversation between six veteran cops and six inner city kids.

The fresh-faced newbie cops, as some of the veterans call them, were the first to graduate from the New York Police Department's gleaming new \$750 million training facility in College Point, Queens. They are also some of the first to be trained under the department's revamped training programs.

And as per the NYPD's more long-standing training policies, most of these rookies will soon be walking some of the toughest high-crime beats on New York City streets — a kind of trial by fire meant to bring them to speed as quickly as possible.

Tonight, however, they are learning about the lives of many of the kids in the communities they'll be policing — communities that, in many ways, are ground zero for the law enforcement issues that have roiled New York and the nation over the past year.

One year ago, bystander videos captured the arrest and killing by chokehold of Eric Garner, a father of six from Staten Island who had long sold loogie cigarettes for a few quarters each. It was the first spark in a tumultuous year nationwide: A few weeks later, a police officer in Ferguson, Mo., shot and killed teenager Michael Brown. In the months to follow, police killed unarmed black men, and one child, in Cleveland, Charleston, Baltimore, and other cities. In each case, protests — some of which turned violent — followed.

Indeed, the year witnessed widespread civil unrest and a protest movement perhaps not seen since the civil rights era. It also began a year of bipartisan soul-searching as many began to contemplate the long, troubled history between law enforcement and the nation's minority communities, and what needs to be done as the nation moves forward.

"There's a new national awareness and movement about racial bias and policing, and this is a very good development," says Harry Levine, professor of sociology at Queens College who studies the arrest patterns of the NYPD. "I think one of the most

powerful forces affecting New York City and its police department is this growing awareness in the rest of America — it's the policing equivalent of the Confederate flag."

On Thursday, President Obama became the first sitting president in the nation's history to visit a federal prison, travelling to El Reno, Okla., to highlight his own efforts to reform the nation's criminal justice system. On Monday, he commuted the sentences of 46 nonviolent drug offenders. In May, the president unveiled the White House's "Task Force on 21st Century Policing," which emphasizes efforts to build bridges between municipal police departments and the black communities they serve.

Across the country, from Sacramento to Chicago to Philadelphia, police departments have begun to try to do just that. And the administration of New York Mayor Bill de Blasio and Police Commissioner Bill Bratton, too, has continued to ease back on stop and frisk encounters and misdemeanor marijuana possession arrests. At the same time, it has begun a federally mandated program to test the use of body cameras and launch a new trial program for community policing, giving officers more time to walk their beats and get to know members of the communities they serve.

Earlier this week, Garner's family settled with the city for \$5.9 million — though not without drawing the ire of some members of the NYPD. But the city has also begun to retrain all of its officers with three-day "refresher courses." These teach new methods for the use of force, new techniques to de-escalate conflicts on the streets, and especially a new commitment to develop better relationships with the communities they police — which is one of the intentions of the event here at the Apollo this evening.

"I believe there is no way out of the trap of police-community hostility without the development of both sides," says Lenora Fulani, the director of "Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids," to the audience of week-on-the-job officers and about 500 community members. Since 2006, she has conducted a series of dialogues and workshops in partnership with the NYPD, seeking to help the two sides understand each other better. Tonight's event is a public demonstration of her work.

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Her efforts grew out of the explosive conflicts between the police and black communities even before the Garner killing, particularly the death of Sean Bell, who was shot and killed the day before his wedding in 2006. Dr. Fulani also notes that she, too, worries about her young black son and has joined the thousands of protesters that have taken to the streets since Garner's killing.

"But we all knew, in our heart of hearts, that protests and new rules and regulations and new laws, that they were not enough," says Fulani, who also co-founded the All Stars Project, which develops after-school programs for kids in poor neighborhoods. "These were human questions, questions about how people in uniform and out of uniform interact in both dangerous and in ordinary situations."

She guides the group through a series of activities to break the ice, but then asks them to address each other, talk about the pressures of their lives and jobs, and how they each feel about their encounters on the streets.

'You can't say that there isn't a problem'

Joshua Crespo, a 17-year-old student from Fort Hamilton High School in Brooklyn, doesn't mince words.

"I do not believe that the majority of cops want to hurt people," he says, "but when it does happen, it goes unanswered. And I don't think it's possible to say that when someone is shot ... and [the cops] don't face justice, you can't say that there isn't a problem, and that there isn't an intrinsic flaw."

Joshua echoes what a lot of police critics and grass-roots community organizers say is the biggest flaw with this year's effort to reform policing.

"We've been really pushing for accountability and greater mechanisms of discipline within the NYPD, and typically that's met with, 'Well, we'll retrain our officers,' " says Monifa Bandele, an organizer with the multi-group Communities United for Police Reform. "And we really believe that all the training in the world is not going to effect change if officers aren't held accountable for that training. Still a year later, none of the officers on the scene of Eric Garner's tragic death have been disciplined or brought to justice."

But Ms. Bandele does note the progress that has been made over the past year, particularly New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo's recent executive order appointing the state's attorney general as the special prosecutor for all matters relating to the deaths of unarmed civilians at the hands of police. The move came after public outrage at what critics called the easy grand jury exonerations of officers in New York and Ferguson.

In South Carolina, however, the officer who shot and killed Walter Scott was immediately charged with murder and indicted by a grand jury two months later. In Baltimore, state prosecutors filed criminal charges against six of the police officers involved in the death of Freddie Gray.

The Justice Department cleared former Officer Darren Wilson of all civil rights violations in the death of Mr. Brown. But its investigation also revealed how a virtually all-white municipal government in Ferguson funded itself through a police force that relentlessly issued fines and tickets against the town's black majority.

The officers talking about their jobs at the Apollo say that being

on high-crime beats can eventually wear officers down.

"I think sometimes some police officers, after they've been in a tough neighborhood for a while, they become – their personalities change almost," says Officer Joe Fratto, a veteran of three years. "They've been in so many situations where they didn't get the respect back that they expected, or somebody cursed them out for no reason, or they were filmed for no reason, for doing something that was legitimate and right. So, their personality changes, where, 'OK, now it's "us versus them," and I'm not even going to try to give anybody any respect,' or anything like that. So that happens a lot of times, and unfortunately, people get the wrong end of that."

And for police critics, the pressures rookies face as they enter these high stress jobs – to issue summonses and make arrests and learn to be "broken windows" cops who focus on penny-ante crimes in the theory that this helps deter more major crimes, creates a vicious cycle of mistrust – and ruined lives.

"There's been a waking up in America about the impact of the focus on these minor offenses," says Professor Levine, whose study of the dramatic racial differences of marijuana arrests helped spur the city to alter its policies. Black New Yorkers, mostly young men, were seven times more likely than whites to be arrested for marijuana possession, even though whites smoke the drug at higher rates, his study found. Latinos were four times more likely.

These young black and Latino young men are then saddled with arrest records, which then becomes a scarlet letter for employers, landlords, and other institutions. And even though the city has begun to simply issue a ticket for displaying marijuana in public, no-shows in court or an inability to pay fines can lead to warrants for their arrest. There are more than 1.2 million outstanding such warrants in the city.

'I'm sorry you had to grow up ... without a father'

Beyond the controversies, however, Fulani is trying to build empathy among the cops and kids.

She asks which of the 12 members of the discussion grew up without their father. Three cops and two kids raise their hands. Fulani has one of the cops without a father face one of the kids with a father, and talk about their experiences.

"What I like about my dad, no matter how much I screw up – which is a lot – he's always in my corner ... letting me know that 'I'm here for you, if you need to talk,' " says 22 year-old Dwayne Dixon. "Just the presence of him being there for me, trying to grow up and be a man, and make other people feel safe, he's always the person that makes me feel safe."

Officer Deidre McDermott's father passed away when she was nine years old. "Not having him around as I matured and grew up was difficult, because there are so many stages in your life, and I feel that as you grow older, it is important to have that mentor, especially your father figure," she tells Mr. Davis, haltingly.

"I'm sorry that you had to grow up in your life, since nine, without a father," the 22-year-old black man says to the veteran cop, in the evening's most dramatic moment. "I feel for you, in a way that I probably could never really understand, because I don't have to deal with that, and I'm sorry that you do."