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# NEW YORK PROGRAM AIMS TO IMPROVE TIES BETWEEN POLICE, TEENS

NEW YORK | By Katie Reilly  
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New York City police and teenagers from some of the city's toughest neighborhoods came together on Tuesday at Harlem's historic Apollo Theater for an event designed to build mutual respect and improve their frayed relationship.

About 925 New York police officers, most recent graduates of the police academy, joined some 425 community members from across the city's five boroughs for an exchange of empathy and laughter which they agreed is often missing in their daily interactions.

The program, Operation Conversation: Cops and Kids, is aimed at improving communication and trust between police and teenagers in New York's low income neighborhoods after years of tension over policing tactics, like the controversial stop-and-frisk policy, and the killing of unarmed black men by white police officers across the country.

"We were asked to do this as a way to expose the rookies early on in their career to different ways of thinking and interacting with the community," said Lenora Fulani, the director and founder of the program.

The program uses performances and skits to increase communication and improve understanding. On Tuesday, officers were able to explain the worst parts of their job, including unpredictability and stereotypes. The teens shared their worst life experiences; racism and absentee parents.

"I realized that we needed to figure out a way of getting police officers and young people into a room together and get them to engage on a level that they never get to do in the world," Fulani said.

The program was launched in 2006, a year of high tension between police and black communities in New York City following the shooting of Sean Bell, an unarmed black man who was killed in a hail of police bullets after his bachelor party.

The workshops have continued amid nationwide protests this year over use of force by police in minority communities.

Fulani said she can often feel the tension between police and participants at the start of each event, so she seats officers next to the kids.

Doris Autry, 49, was proud to see her 14-year-old daughter, Dejanae, on stage and hopes it will enable her to walk down the street without being scared of police.

Police said the event gives officers the chance to better understand the people they serve.

"What this does is give them the opportunity to see young people in a different light," said NYPD First Deputy Commissioner Benjamin Tucker.