



## **Whose Police Department? How the NYPD Serves the Rich and Oppresses the People**

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Plainly racist comments made by NYPD officers were recently published on a Facebook page for the world to see. “Savage Day”, “this coconut parade”, and “pure savagery” were just some of the scurrilous terms posted. While these ugly comments targeted people who participated in the city’s West Indian American Day Parade, they do not merely reflect an isolated incident – rather, they represent a daily reality for communities of color in NYC, and are emblematic of widespread and toxic NYPD attitudes and practices.

Late last month, NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg told an audience of MIT students, “I have my own army in the NYPD,” referring to the city’s police force as the 7th largest army in the world. The Mayor’s words raise the question – whose army truly is the NYPD? Shouldn’t it be the people’s, whose taxes provide the funding for the Department, and whom police officers pledge to honor, serve, and protect? “Army” denotes an agent of war, one that applies force to achieve its ends, rather than an instrument of solving problems and keeping the peace. What does it mean for the communities where the city’s officers are mostly deployed – namely, low-income neighborhoods of color – if the city’s mayor views the cops there as part of an army, soldiers in a war?

Critics of the NYPD often cite its harsh, arrogant, sometimes violent conduct, as if its officers see themselves as outside the rule of law. Perhaps the proprietary and aggressive tone set at the top of New York City government sends an ‘enabling’ message to cops on the street – that they are not accountable to the people, but rather that they are members of an occupying force and the people are the enemy.

This powerful blend – the permission to be aggressive and the message of immunity – helps to explain the numerous stories police reform organizations hear about abusive police practices, especially from members of New York City’s marginalized groups: Young men of color arrested and ticketed for trespass while standing in front of their own building. Sex workers pressured to provide sex in return for their release. Gay or transgender people roughed up and touched inappropriately while congregating on a street corner.

The approach of acting aggressively with virtual impunity that characterizes much of the NYPD’s practices may also help explain these damning statistics: in 2010, the NYPD reported making about 614,000 stop and frisks, nearly 90% involving people of color; a resident in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Brownsville is 150 times more likely to be arrested for marijuana

possession than someone living on the Upper East Side in Manhattan.

The pressure of being, in effect, always in battle mode leads some officers to object to the tactics they are expected to employ. “I’m not going to keep arresting innocent people, I’m not going to keep searching people for no reason, I’m not going to keep writing up people for no reason, I’m tired of this,” was one such statement made by a street level cop.

These stories, statistics, and quotes together present a disturbing and all-too-real picture of a police department that engages in harsh and objectionable practices that harm people and communities, and seriously compromise the quality of life of hundreds of thousands of the city’s residents. Perhaps if Mayor Bloomberg refrained from referring to the NYPD as an army responsible only to him, and instead reframed their purpose and presence on the city’s streets as peace-keepers and problem-solvers, they would cease their bullying and badgering tactics and use of verbal slurs and take positive steps to create a liveable and inclusive city for all New Yorkers.

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