

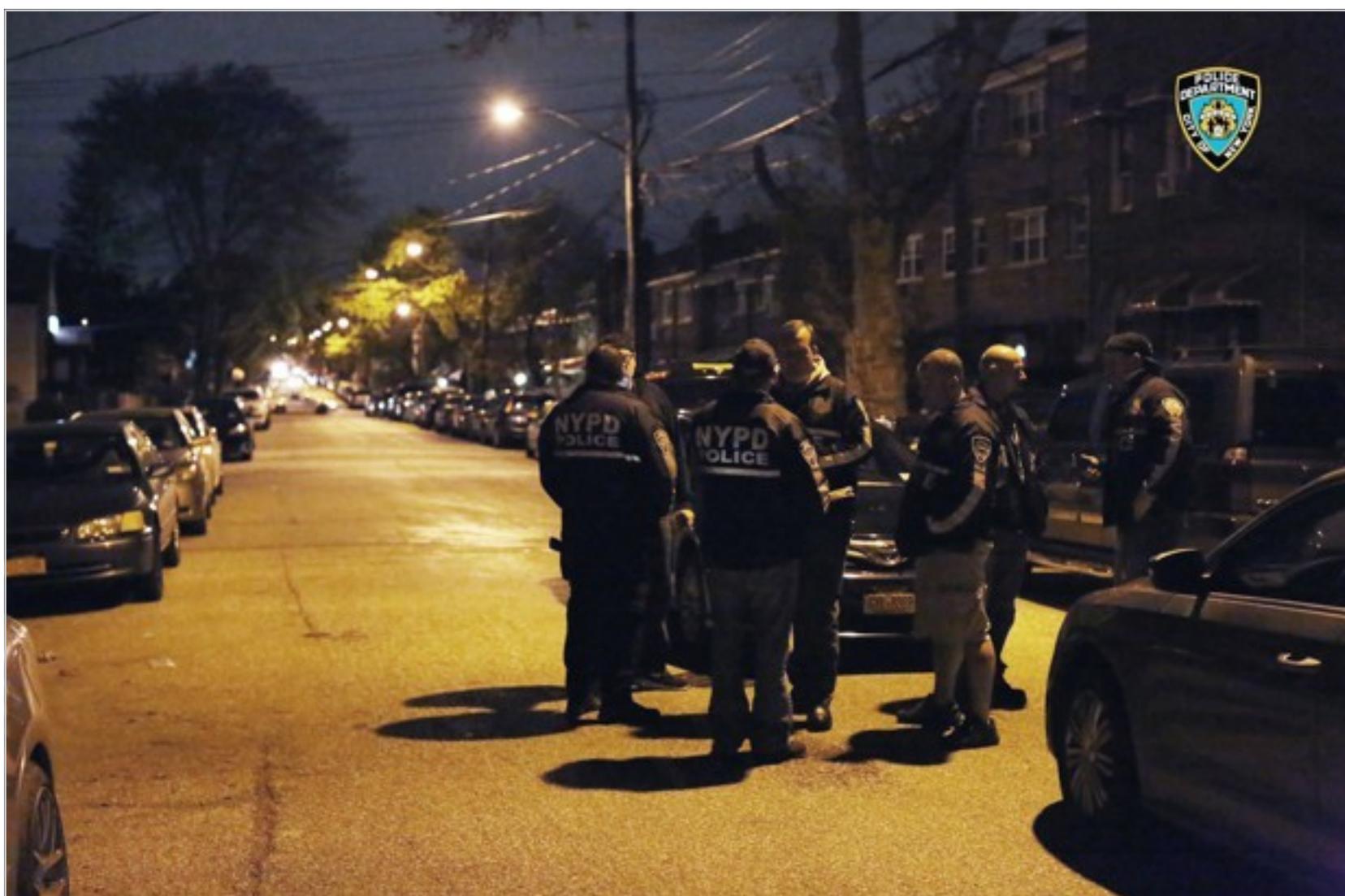
From The Atlantic

CITYLAB

Has 'Gang Policing' Replaced Stop-and-Frisk?

The NYPD says operations against teenage crews are effectively curbing youth violence. Others see a new way to continue racially biased policing.

GEORGE JOSEPH | [@georgejoseph94](#) | Feb 28, 2017 | [2 Comments](#)



Officers gather in the Bronx during a takedown of two alleged gangs in the early hours of Wednesday, April 27, 2016. (New York Police Department/AP)

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Flash bang grenades exploding, helicopter rotors sputtering—these were the sounds Paula Clarke woke up to [one morning last April](#). “At first I thought we were being attacked by ISIS,” said Clarke at a recent panel in West Harlem. “It’s a nightmare from which I have still not awoken.” The pre-dawn intrusion was, in fact, a law enforcement operation looking for alleged gang members in Clarke’s Bronx neighborhood of Williamsbridge—including her son, who did not live there at the time.

That day, over 700 agents from the NYPD and a host of federal agencies, including Immigration and Customs Enforcement, swarmed the predominantly African-American neighborhood. The operation [ended](#) in [120 indictments](#) and [88 arrests](#) on charges of racketeering conspiracy, narcotics conspiracy, narcotics distribution, and firearms offenses. Clarke’s son was eventually arrested, and she says she has not been able to see him for over four months.

After the raid, ICE agents congratulated each other on their skill and professionalism in what they called the “largest gang take-down” in New York City history, according to emails obtained by CityLab via the Freedom of Information Act. [Local news](#) reports [mostly followed this triumphant line](#). As one ICE officer excitedly wrote, the operation “has more media interest than I can catalogue and the story was picked up worldwide.” (These emails have been posted at the bottom of the article).

“We don’t operate with a broad brush, but with a scalpel,” says the NYPD’s Chief of Crime Control Strategies. “And the numbers back that up.”

But since then, others [in the Bronx and beyond](#) have criticized these increasingly aggressive gang suppression tactics, which they see as the department's way of continuing to crack down on the communities that bore the brunt of the NYPD's [stop-and-frisk program](#). That controversial initiative allowed officers to detain and question pedestrians and was mostly used against black and Latino residents in poor neighborhoods.

"Stop-and-frisk is now unconstitutional, and so the gang raids have replaced that," says Clarke. "They classify all these young black and brown men as gang members, but these kids are just groups of young people, like any other kids. They're dead broke.... They don't have anything but the clothes on their back."

The dedicated turn to gang-policing began in October 2012, [just months](#) after courts had begun moving to halt stop-and-frisk. Then-Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly [doubled](#) the size of his Gang Division to go after teenage street crews across the city. From the beginning Kelly [made clear](#) most of these targets were not high-level players. The crews are not "established gangs such as the Bloods and Crips," he said, but "looser associations of younger men who identify themselves by the block they live on, or on which side of a housing development they reside."

Since then authorities have [marked numerous blocks](#) as gang ridden, identifying the presence of violent youth crews as justification for large-scale police raids all across the city. As can be seen in the map below, the NYPD's identification of gang blocks largely covers the same black and Latino neighborhoods [most affected by stop-and-frisk](#). (The map is based on 2016 Census data on black and Latino residency and NYPD location data of reputed gangs, which [activist Josmar Trujillo adapted from a New York Daily News story](#) and gave to CityLab. Click on each block dot to see which gang or crew is alleged to be active there.)

As the map makes clear, police identifications of crews concentrate in Harlem in Manhattan, across the Bronx, and in low-income Brooklyn neighborhoods, like East New York, East Flatbush, and Bedford-Stuyvesant—all of which experienced [some of the highest concentrations of stop-and-frisks](#).

Critics such as [K. Babe Howell](#), a criminal law professor at the City University of New York School of Law, say these identifications are only possible because of the NYPD's loose definition of "gang member." As Howell pointed out in a [2015 University of Denver Criminal Law Review article](#), according to the [NYPD Intelligence Unit's criteria](#) an individual can be certified as an "Identified Gang Member" for checking off any of the two following boxes: "Known Gang Location," "Scars/Tattoos Associated w/ Gangs," "Gang Related Documents," "Colors Associated w/ Known Gang Members," and "Hand Signs Associated with Gangs."

Much like under stop-and-frisk, these generous definitions could expose many people to police suspicion simply for growing up in certain neighborhoods. As Howell [said](#) at a recent panel on gang policing in West Harlem, “If your bodega is a prime hangout, according to them that’s a criteria met.”

“Once you call us a gang you can handle us a differently from how we were supposed to be handled as human beings.”

Dermot Shea, the NYPD’s Chief of Crime Control Strategies, says police are very precise about who they consider a gang member and only go after those doing considerable harm to their communities. “We are very confident that once someone is identified as a gang member, make no mistake—they are a gang member,” says Shea. “If someone says they’re a gang member or boasts online that they’re a gang member, then they’re a gang member. And if we are unsure about evidence like a tattoo, we corroborate it with an independent person.”

Emmanuel Campbell, a violence interruptor with the community group 696 Queensbridge, insists that sporadic acts of violence between crews of young people shouldn’t be classified as organized gang conflict. “People join crews because they do basketball, do music, they grew up together, and sometimes they start forming to protect themselves and their neighborhoods,” he says. “But once you call us a gang you can handle us a differently from how we were supposed to be handled as human beings.”

With [crime and arrests at record lows](#) in New York City, there’s also a question about why the NYPD feels the need to be so aggressive on gang violence right now, when cities like Chicago and Los Angeles are known to have more durable and expansive gang networks. “The goal from the NYPD’s point of view is to wipe out the last source of remaining serious violence in the city,” says Alex Vitale, a sociology professor at Brooklyn College. “They view the way to do that

is to go after these youth crews, whose violence is tit for tat, and block by block.” But Vitale warns that this NYPD erasure approach could devastate community stability and ultimately pave the way for more gang activity in the future.

Shea insists that many community members support the NYPD’s anti-gang operations, suggesting that critics don’t come from neighborhoods affected by crew violence. “I don't think they live on Grand Concourse in the Bronx or Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn,” says Shea. “People are begging us to take on these cases, and we are very comfortable with who we are choosing to investigate.” Shea also says the city’s falling crime statistics speak to the success of their approach. “We don’t operate with a broad brush, but with a scalpel, and the numbers back that up.”

Paula Clarke says the gang raid in her Bronx neighborhood has fundamentally transformed the community—but not in a good way. “They’ve removed the ‘gang’ and nothing has changed. We still have stabbings, shootings here,” she says. “But for me as a parent now, the neighborhood, it’s totally barren. Not as many people frequent the park, no one is in the soccer fields. We lost a whole generation of young people.”

[ICE Officials Discussing Bronx Gang Raid](#)

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