



The Time is Now

By: Jason Salmon

The New York Police Department has a long history of police brutality, and a lack of transparency and accountability.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, this legacy is rearing its ugly head. As the government has called for social distancing measures, the enforcement measures have been dictated by race and class.

For many people of color, particularly Black and brown teenagers, the epidemic has provided yet another excuse for overly aggressive police behavior in our communities.

Videos have been circulating on social media, explicitly showing the growing disparity between how the police are enforcing social distancing. The numbers are staggering: Black and brown New Yorkers made up 98% of arrests and 81% of summonses. In communities of color, the police are using excessive force to disperse young people, even brutally beating and arresting them in some instances. There are no masks dispensed, and no kind words. Just sheer unadulterated force.

This behavior is even more disturbing when juxtaposed against a photo of young, white millennials sunbathing in Central Park, where it just looks like a normal New York sunny day in the park. In this photo, NYPD officers are happily dispensing masks to these young people. No dispersal, no disrespect, no harsh words, no violence. Just free masks.

Unfortunately, this sort of Tale of Two (New York) Cities is nothing new. As a kid growing up in Brooklyn, my friends and I endured the abusive policing policies during the Guiliani and Bloomberg administrations. Stop and Frisk and Broken Windows Policing were in full effect. Illegal searches of our persons were normal, and our constitutional rights were constantly violated. I remember the tragic 1999 killing of Amadou Diallo, who was shot 41 times by four NYPD officers, in the vestibule of his apartment building. Diallo was unarmed, and simply trying to enter his home. The four officers were tried and acquitted. Two years earlier, Abner Louima was taken into the back of the 70th police precinct, handcuffed and sodomized with a broken broomstick.

Despite this history, meaningful police reform legislation has languished in the New York State Legislature.

In 2018, the Democrats took back the State Senate. They ousted the majority of the Independent Democratic Conference (IDC) members, and elected a number of young, progressive-minded representatives who wasted no time in passing more reform-oriented bills than any other session to date: sweeping rent regulations, pre-trial detention reforms, GENDA and early voting provisions.

These are accomplishments that not only should our legislators hang their hats on, but that activists, community organizers, and everyday New Yorkers can be proud of.

Yet, an elephant of epic proportions sits in the room. Despite all these progressive reforms, the legislature did not pass a single police reform bill. In fact, not one such bill ever even made it out of committee. In the City where Eric Garner was brutally strangled to death on video by an NYPD officer, and in a country where countless unarmed African Americans, annually lose their lives unjustly at the hands of the police, we must ask ourselves: why did not one police reform bill pass in the NYS legislature? Where is the political will to enact such legislation that may well improve relations between communities of color and law enforcement?

Something I know for certain from living in this community my entire life is that we cannot fight today's problems, with yesterday's solutions. Especially when yesterday's solutions did not work in the first place.

It is time to focus on genuine police reform. COVID-19 has brought to the forefront the deepest inequities in our society, and policing is one of the most pronounced. If we are ever going to create an equitable New York State, which all our politicians give lip service to, then now is the time to act. If not now, then when?

This is why I have been on the front lines fighting for police reform in our City and our State. More police with more weapons, and no real accountability, do not make our communities safer. As your Senator, I will marshal all of the assets at my disposal to introduce and fight for reforms to our criminal legal system - establishing new community safety models that change the way we treat marginalized communities in New York State.

Demand Transparency and Accountability

Demand transparency and accountability for bad actors within law enforcement by fighting for the Safer New York Act which includes: the Police Statistics and Transparency (STAT) Act, requiring police departments to record and report data related to low-level offenses, repealing New York State's police secrecy law, 50-A, codifying the special prosecutor executive order 147, in order to ensure impartial and thorough investigations regarding police killings, and legalizing the adult-use of cannabis with a focus on reinvesting in the communities that have been ravaged by the "War On Drugs".

Ban Bias-Based Policing

Prohibit the profiling and targeting of individuals based on their race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, immigration status, HIV status, and/or other marginalized identity and establish rights to allow people who have been profiled to sue the police in court. Pass legislation to decriminalize sex-work and repeal the "Walking While Trans" statute.

Defund the Police and Refund the Community

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Protect Immigrant New Yorkers

Prohibit local law enforcement from enforcing federal immigration law. Pass “Protect Our Courts Act” to protect immigrant New Yorkers’ constitutional rights, and ensure they can access the courts without being arrested by I.C.E.

Ban Deadly Force

Reform the standards under which police may use force and prohibit the use of deadly force except when necessary to protect human life and only after all other non-lethal options have been exhausted.

Require Racial Impact Data

Require that all state funding for local law enforcement include minimum standards for racial impact data collection, reporting, and publication.