

STOP AND FRISK

noun

the policing practice of stopping a person briefly to search them for weapon or prohibited items

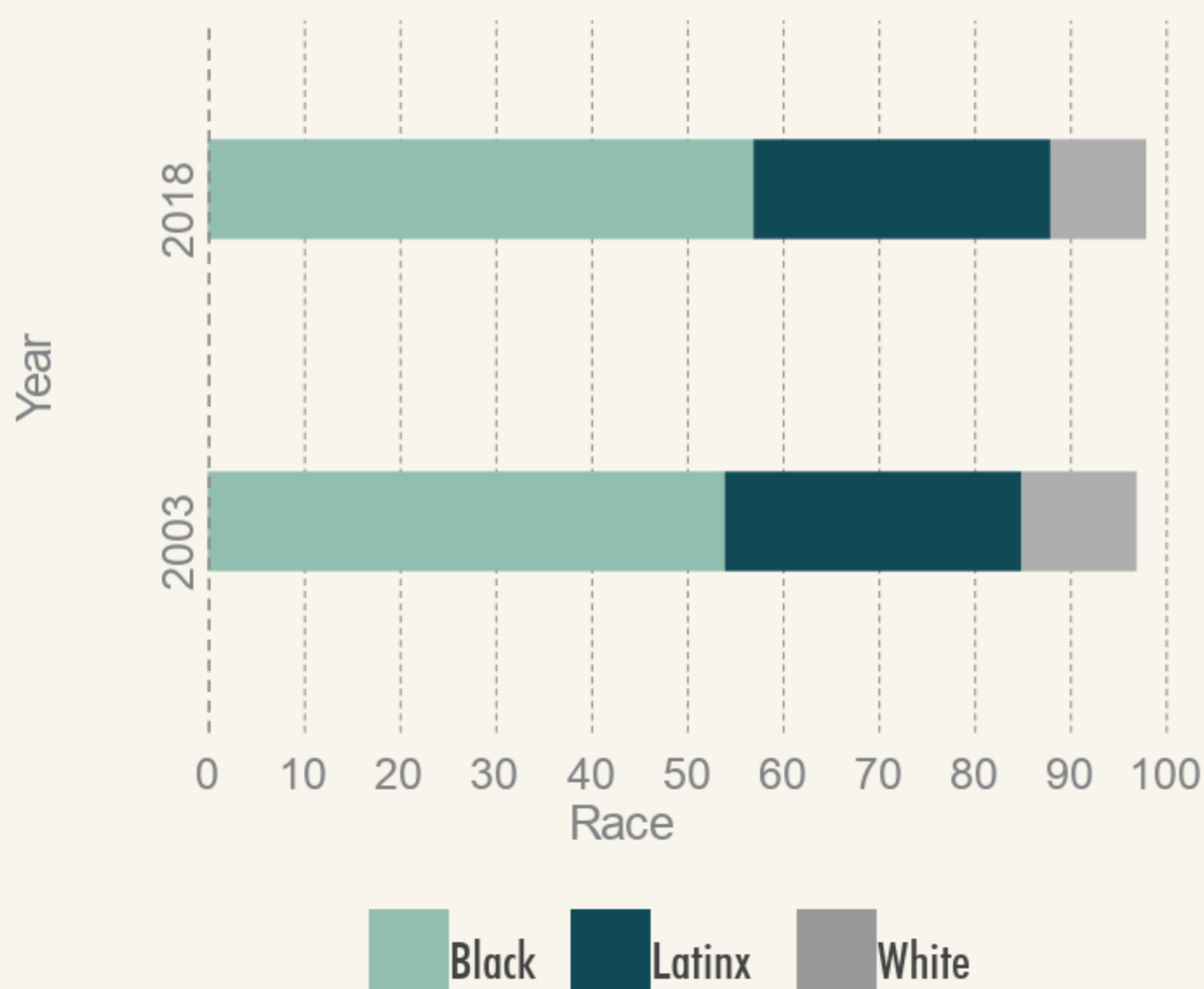
The Future of Stop-and-Frisk and Why it's about More than Policing

About the policy

Stop-and-frisk has been a long running policy in major cities, most notably New York, that consistently brings about debate at both the political and community levels. The practice essentially provides high levels of police officer discretion as it encourages officers to stop and search individuals who appear to have some suspicion of possessing contraband. At first glance the policy seems logical, but a few issues arise. One issue is that racial disparities in the stops are undeniable and staggeringly high (Team, 2018), with groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union finding that there have been several years when more black men were stopped by police in New York City than the total number of black men that actually live in the city. As police brutality and race relations continue to be important topics of conversation in the media, this statistic does not bode well for the police department or the policymakers. Another issue is that most opinions formed about policing practices by members of the community are the result of personal interactions or observations (Meares, 2014). It's a systematic issue that most clearly affects people in small and personalized settings. This makes it difficult to tackle the root of the problem when the attention is given primarily to specific instances. Perhaps the most overall troubling issue with stop-and-frisk is just how frequently the suspect in question is found to be completely innocent, possessing no contraband of any kind. This beckons the question: Is the squeeze worth the juice? Is the amount of contraband seized through these searches worth the continuation of the practice?

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NYPD Racial Disparities in Stops

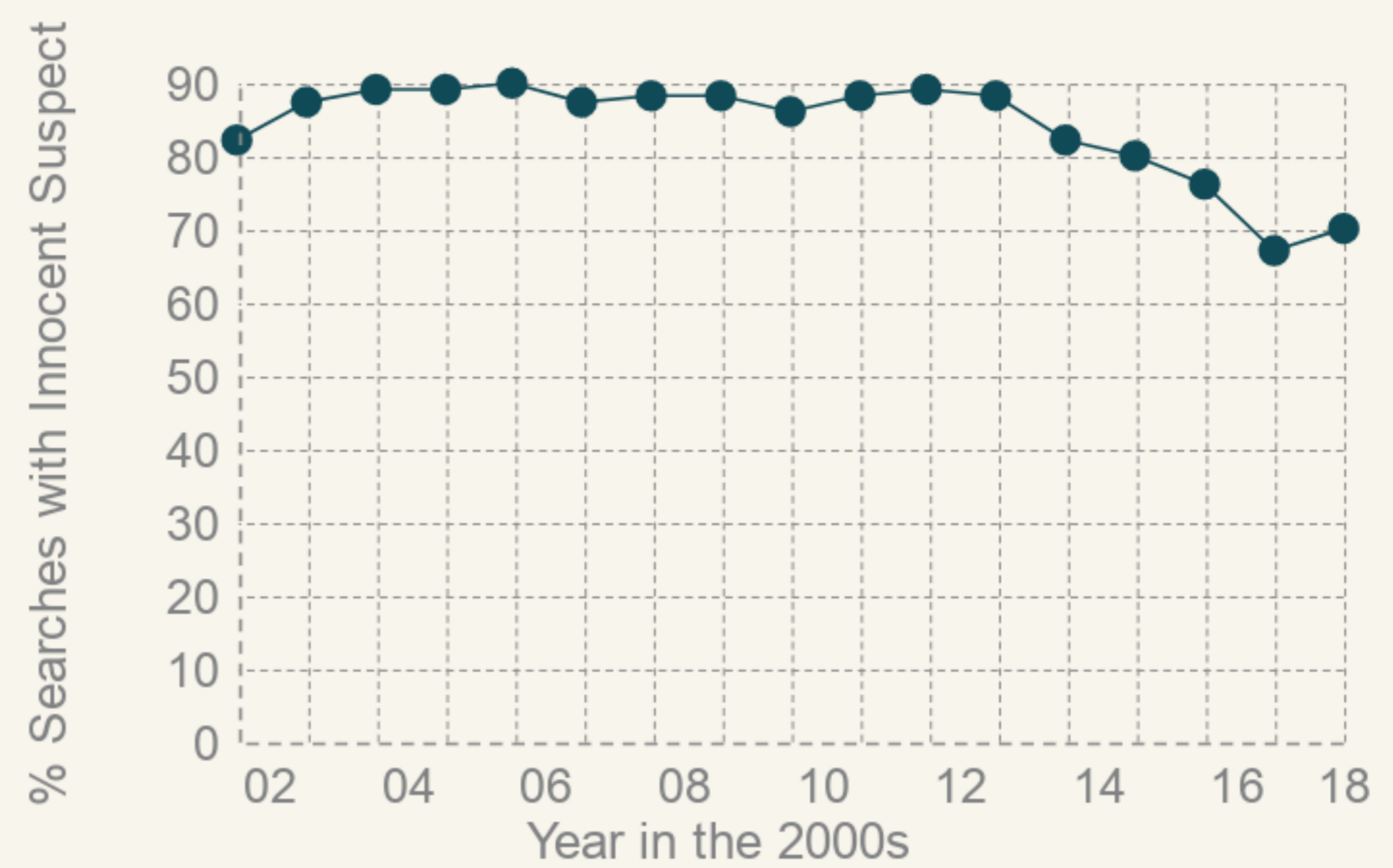


Comparing data over time

The New York Civil Liberties Union has found that the racial breakdown of stops has remained fairly constant over the past several decades (NYCLU, 2019), with the vast majority of individuals stopped being minorities. Recent research from the University of North Carolina surrounding Charlotte, NC policing practices suggests that the racial disparities in officer searches are also consistent among various officer races (Baumgartner et al., 2019). This means that the problem is a systematic issue that goes beyond the demographics of the specific officer in the situation. For most of the years during this time span, at least 50% of those stopped were under the age of 24, making young minorities an especially high target population. Racial stereotypes throughout society are perpetuated by this policing disparity, and such practices increase the odds of minorities being put into situations that are both uncomfortable and unnecessary.

NYPD Stop-and-Frisk Success Rates

The chart to the right depicts the data gathered by the New York Civil Liberties Union over the past several decades regarding the number of fruitless searches made by the NYPD (NYCLU, 2019). These numbers are incredibly high, with almost 9 out of 10 individuals stopped being completely innocent from 2003-2012. A decreasing trend in the fruitless search rates seems to begin around 2013 and level out between 2017 and 2018. These decreases are correlated with decreases in the number of searches, with the number of searches being cut in at least half each year from 2012 to 2016. The number of stops peaked in 2011 at around 685,000 stops and hit a low in 2018 with only 11,008 stops reported by the NYPD for the year.



WHY SO COMPLEX?

Fruitless police searches don't necessarily seem to be the worst problem facing the nation today. It's easy to wonder what the real harm is surrounding these interactions. The primary concern with this "better-safe-than-sorry" mentality is that these officer-civilian encounters are incredibly likely to escalate beyond a simple stop-and-frisk. Not only are minority individuals more likely to be stopped, they are also more likely to be met with force, violence, and the drawing of weapons by officers (Kramer and Remster, 2018). The probability of violence changes the risk factors surrounding these stops, raising concern for communities and interest groups and increasing the urgency of the policy conversation. It may at this point seem natural to question why this policy is even still in consideration due to the high levels of apparent discrimination and relatively low success rates of the searches historically. The problem with doing away with stop-and-frisk entirely is that there isn't a clear alternative policy that would be more effective. In fact, some researchers suggest that the policy is absolutely necessary in order to combat the contraband problem in major cities (Ridgeway, 2017). President Trump has also continued to support stop-and-frisk as the best policy for the job (Madhani, 2018). Police discretion does benefit civilians in many ways. While it is a small percentage, the 10 percent of stops that were fruitful may have benefitted civilians in ways that aren't immediately observable. As a result of all of these factors, stop-and-frisk should be significantly modified but not eliminated altogether.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The number of stops made by the New York Police Department has consistently decreased in the recent years. As shown above, there seems to be a positive relationship between the decrease in the number of stops and the rate of fruitless searches. To combat this issue, restrictions should be placed on the number of stops a single officer is allowed to make during a given time period. This would require officers to gather more information and be more selective regarding who they choose to stop-and-frisk. For law enforcement to effectively accomplish its goals within society, community trust is important. This lack of effectiveness in search and seizure reduces community trust in law enforcement's ability to do its job well. Increased rates of seizure with searches will lead to an increase in community trust levels. It has also been found that minority officers, both racial minorities and females, search less frequently overall than their white male coworkers (Baumgartner et al., 2019). An increase in minority and female officers will likely lead to lower numbers of searches and therefore, more effective searches. A greater number of policies for minority inclusion in law enforcement employment is an appropriate policy response to the stop-and-frisk debate. As far as solving the issue of racial disparities, officers should be required to undergo more informative training opportunities in regards to the dangers of racial stereotyping. Overall, these practical measures can be used to reduce the number of fruitless searches made by officers and to bridge the growing racial disparities amongst those who are stopped.

You can help! Contact your local policymakers and/or your law enforcement agencies to encourage increased training for employees regarding racial divide and stereotyping. Information and context is incredibly important as it relates to an officer's ability to make equitable decisions in cases of stop-and-frisk. Officers are asked to make quick decisions in low-information environments and so their tendency is to rely on stereotypes as a primary resource for decision making. This does not have to be the case. Let's work to provide officers with resources that deconstruct their stereotypes and reframe the ways in which they make the decision to search.

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