

Stories from Harlem

Poverty and the daily reality of living in substandard housing

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There's something about elevators and stairwells in high-rise housing projects. If the walls could speak they'd tell a whole lot about what generations of poor Black families have had to endure. Not just the daily reality of living in substandard housing, but the whole way you're treated by the authorities, like you're somehow a criminal.

In Harlem some of the projects are over 20 stories high, with several thousand residents. Lack of adequate city services means basic repairs don't get made, trash cans are always overflowing, there's rat infestation. But it's not just this. Horrible and demeaning living conditions are just one part of what people here have to put up with.

There's another kind of infestation and invasion. Something way more dangerous to people's health. There is the constant knowledge that the housing authority, child services, and other government officials can come down on you at any time. There are the Viper cameras, installed in the entrances and hallways, which mean people are under constant surveillance. It feels a lot like prison. And then there's the POLICE—who serve as a frontline in a concerted and conscious effort by the powers-that-be to repress, control and contain a whole section of society. These armed men roam about, in ones and twos or in packs, sweating people on the streets and in the playgrounds. And for them, a favorite stalking ground is the housing projects where they target especially the youth.

Just look at the reality of the NYPD's official stop-and-frisk policy. The NYPD is on pace to stop and frisk over 700,000 people in 2011, or more than *1,900 people each and every day*. The authorities argue this is about stopping crime and "keeping the streets safe." But check out the facts: More than 85 percent of those stopped and frisked are Black or Latino. More than 90 percent of them were not even alleged to be doing something wrong when the police stopped them. All of this is totally and blatantly illegitimate and illegal under the stated laws of this country. And it's not just in New York City that this kind of thing goes on. Throughout the U.S., they might not call it stop-and-frisk, it might not always be a stated policy. But for millions of Black and Latino people, especially the youth, getting stopped, harassed, and made to "assume the position" is a basic fact of life—where if you're "lucky" you won't end up being brutalized or killed. But if you're not, the police report chronicling the last moments of your life might say you were shot because you made a "furtive movement," "looked like a suspect," or doesn't list any reason at all.

This is one step in a pipeline that has locked 2.3 million people in prison. This is one of the "entry points" for a whole repressive trajectory—where the cops, the courts, the whole legal system—feeds mass incarceration.

Anyone who reads the basic statistics on stop-and-frisk should be horrified and outraged. But these facts only tell a scrap of the whole story. When I talk to Jessie, who has lived in one of the projects in Harlem, she gives me a vivid picture of what this means for people. Jessie [not her real name] has a teenage son who has been a constant victim of stop-and-frisk police harassment and brutality. When we knock on her door she is literally packing up her apartment, getting ready to move. She is being kicked out of public housing because she has been deemed an “undesirable tenant.” Why? Because her son has been arrested too many times by the police.

At first Jessie says she can’t talk right now, she’s too busy getting ready to move. But then, within five minutes, the stories start pouring out.

She starts talking about how the police are always jacking up her son and other youth, just ‘cause they’re hanging around outside the buildings. The police come up with all kinds of pretexts—there was a robbery, they found a gun in the trash can; usually nothing that has anything to do with the kids they’re harassing. Jessie says she has actually been banned from the precinct. She says:

“They banned me, said if I didn’t leave they were going to arrest me—because I was saying you’re dirty, you’re fucking corrupt, you’re trying to murder our children and they didn’t like the words coming out of my mouth. They trying to take our kids from us. And now they’re trying to threaten them, take them into the staircase and go in their clothes. They touch their personal parts, they pull their pants down. They bring them up in the elevator and take them into the staircase cause they can’t do it any other [legal] way, and they take off their clothes to make sure they don’t have anything on them. So they do it the illegal way. This has happened to my son twice. When they don’t find anything they give them a loitering ticket. And then you have to go to court, you got to answer these tickets cause if you don’t answer these tickets, once you get like two or three, then a warrant comes out. Then they come get you.

“If I have to go to jail, I’ll go to jail. They can’t tell me I can’t be there for my son. I get very belligerent because I want everybody to know that they’re trying to kill our children, they’re trying to destroy our children. So now, ‘cause they can’t catch them for something they’re taking them into the staircases and stripping them naked.

“My son has had a case since 2009, there’s no reason a case should be in court from 2009, we’re going to 2012. But they keep that case open so they can catch him for something else and then they can charge him like that, adding on when he goes to court for a serious case, which was actually a school fight...”

And she tells me about how this has really badly affected her son getting a job and staying in school.

“My whole thing about this case is the fact that he can’t go get a job nowhere cause he has an open case. Close it—either you charge him or let him go. The job thing is he has a record and that’s going to stand against him, as long as that case is open. [When he goes for a job] they have asked him if he has any cases open and he says yes.”

Jessie tells me she has lived in these projects since she was five years old. She’s now 50 and

being forced out.

“They keep harassing me and because with the harassment and the arrests, Housing [Authority], they said to me you need to put your child out of your house, because he’s been arrested, he has a record. You’re not allowed to be in this housing if they feel you’re ‘undesirable.’ I’m considered ‘undesirable.’ One of the big things was my son was arrested when he was visiting somebody. They busted down the door and they found guns, they found weed in the house. They arrested everybody in the house. And I had to fight, fight, fight. I had to get a lawyer. Because they tried to charge my son. No, my son was not participating, he was just there. They took me to housing court—they got me for that. They made a decision, they took me to court, they voted against me... The housing court took me up on charges too, for him being there [in the apartment that was raided].”

“I’m deemed undesirable too. Housing court decided against me. What they did was they said your lease is terminated. But mind you, the kicker is, I took my case to the state Supreme Court and they backed housing up.”

We’ve been standing out in the hallway this whole time and Jessie goes back into the apartment, then quickly comes back out holding what looks to be about a three-inch-thick pile of paper. She says:

“See this. This is my case against the New York City Housing Authority. I have so many pages it just drives me crazy. This has been going on a year and a half. But my thing is, my son has never been to jail. So how would you come to that decision when he has never been to jail. He’s never been convicted.”

I say, and even if he had been convicted of something, why does that give them the right to deem you “undesirable,” to kick you out.

“Because I refused to put my child in the street.”

And if you had kicked him out would they have let you stay?

“No, they still wouldn’t let me. At the end of the time, I took him off the lease and let him go somewhere else. But it didn’t matter.”

Jessie has a lot of stories—she’s just telling me a few. There was the time they came banging on her door, looking for her son. She tells this one with an ironic, comical edge.

“One time they came to my house. Boom, boom. Boom, boom. My son is in jail [at the time], mind you. ‘Open the door, open the door.’ I’m looking through my peephole. ‘Open my door for what? I’m not opening my door, not me, you’re not coming in my house.’ [They say,] ‘Open the fucking door.’

“I finally opened the door. They got a sergeant because he had on a white shirt and he was like, ‘you need to open the door now.’ So when I opened the door I yelled to my neighbor to come out cause I had to have a witness. The police

said to me, 'your son just robbed somebody.' And my son was in jail! If my son would have been home, he would have been arrested and charged with robbery. They said they saw him. I said how could my son have robbed someone when he's in jail, motherfucker."

This whole time I was talking with Jessie, her next door neighbor, Marleen [not her real name], has been popping in and out of her apartment, getting in on the conversation, adding detail to these stories. She too has a son who's a victim of police harassment. Marleen starts talking about how people are not allowed to walk up and down the stairs, that they have to take the elevator. The VIPER surveillance cameras are up all over the entrances and hallways, but not in the staircases. She says they can't even just use the staircases to go up or down a couple of stories. And when I ask her why, she shrugs her shoulders and says, "They just tell us what we can't do."

She tells her own horror story of how her apartment was raided by the police.

"They busted the door down. And they never found nothing but they ripped up the house. They lined everyone against the wall in the hallway. People heard the commotion and came out and they told everyone to go back inside. They dragged one person out [of my apartment] with a gun pointed to his head."

Jessie recounts, "I opened the door and saw the whole family lined up in handcuffs."

Then Marleen says something that kind of concentrates in a way, the absolute outrageousness of the almost matter-of-fact, daily, fascistic repression they're subjected to.

She tells me that when the kids go out to the store, mothers use binoculars to watch them because they're afraid of what might happen to them with the police.

Just think about that for a moment. Mothers are buying binoculars. They're standing at the window, looking down, watching in anticipation, as their sons and daughters go outside to get something at the store. They need to know that their kids are all right, that they are going to come back—and not just disappear after being stopped and frisked. They know that if something bad does happen, they need to be a witness.

One of the things that keeps coming through in all these stories is how the police not only brutalize you, but they seem to make a sport of really trying to do everything they can to *humiliate* the people, especially the youth. And the people know it and deeply *feel* this. Jessie tells of one time when the police chased down her son and were beating him. She came out to try and get them to stop and Jessie says, "That's when they made the remark, go the f**k back to the projects where you belong."

Jessie tells the story of how the police take the youth into the staircase and make them take off their clothes. She said, "My son told me, they humiliate you when they catch you. That's the word he used. And if you run from them they might shoot you."

"They don't want a loudmouth. But now I know it's my time to move because my son said, 'Ma please be quiet. I love you.' He told me that they always talk shit to him. He's like, 'When I'm outside I got to deal with them telling me

about you. [They say,] your mother is a bitch, your mother better keep her mouth shut and then they harass him some more.' So when I see them I don't want to say nothing because I don't want to cause him shit."

Jessie has to get back to packing. But before we leave she makes clear to us that, even though she's being forced out, she isn't giving up. In fact she says, now she will have time to get more involved in things like the struggle against stop-and-frisk.

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