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NYPD cops regularly harass NYCHA residents by waving flashlights to break up crowds: report



A number of New Yorkers have complained about NYPD police officers shining their flashlights at them until they disperse from where they had gathered outside their housing projects. (Shutterstock; Gardiner Anderson / New York Daily News)

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They weren't stopped, they weren't questioned and they weren't frisked.

But for some New Yorkers living in NYCHA developments, their encounters with the NYPD felt just as intrusive, with cops shining flashlights at them in a way that made them feel like criminals even though they were only socializing outside their homes.

The concerns are raised in a report by the Office of the Community Liaison (OCL), which provides feedback from New Yorkers to the NYPD's federal monitor as the monitor assesses the reforms ordered by a judge in the landmark stop and frisk ruling of 2013.

"Residents report that when they are simply hanging out in common areas or directly in front of their own buildings — socializing, getting fresh air or relaxing in the evening — officers will position themselves nearby and remain in the area for extended periods, at times shining flashlights around the space," the report says.

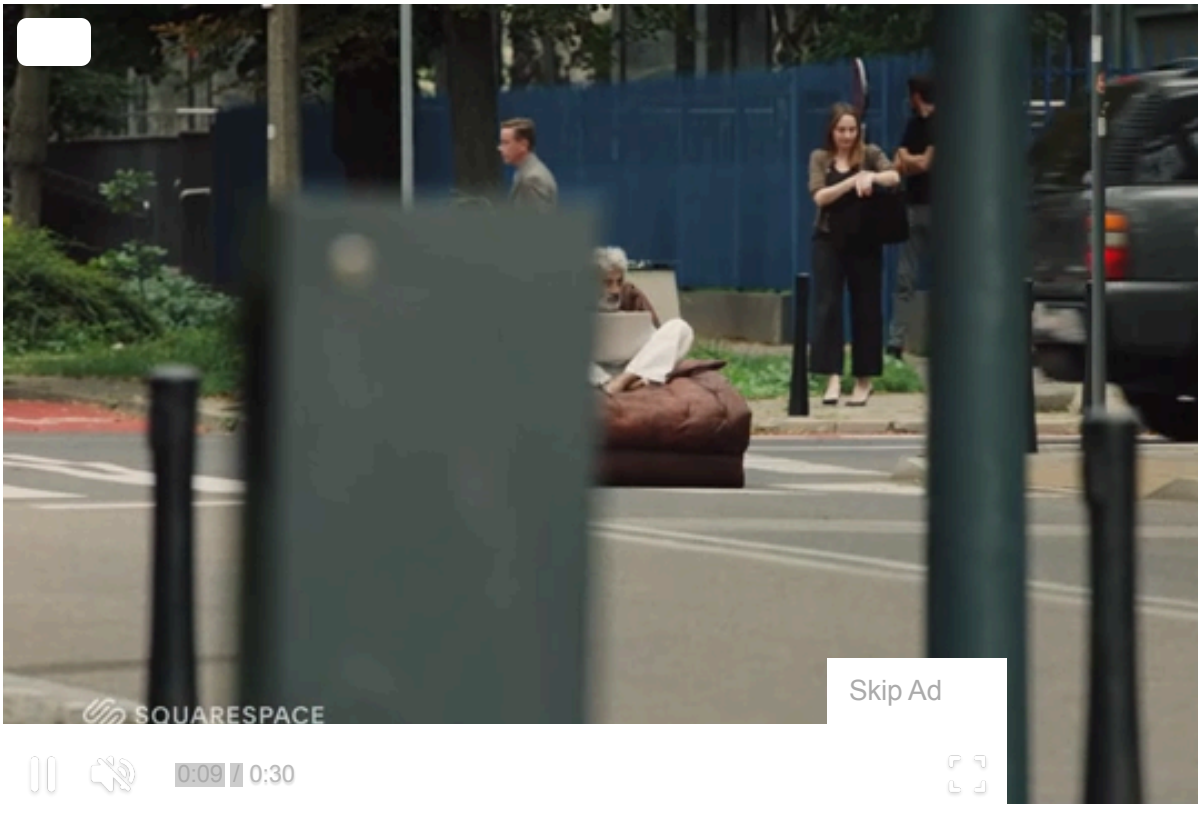


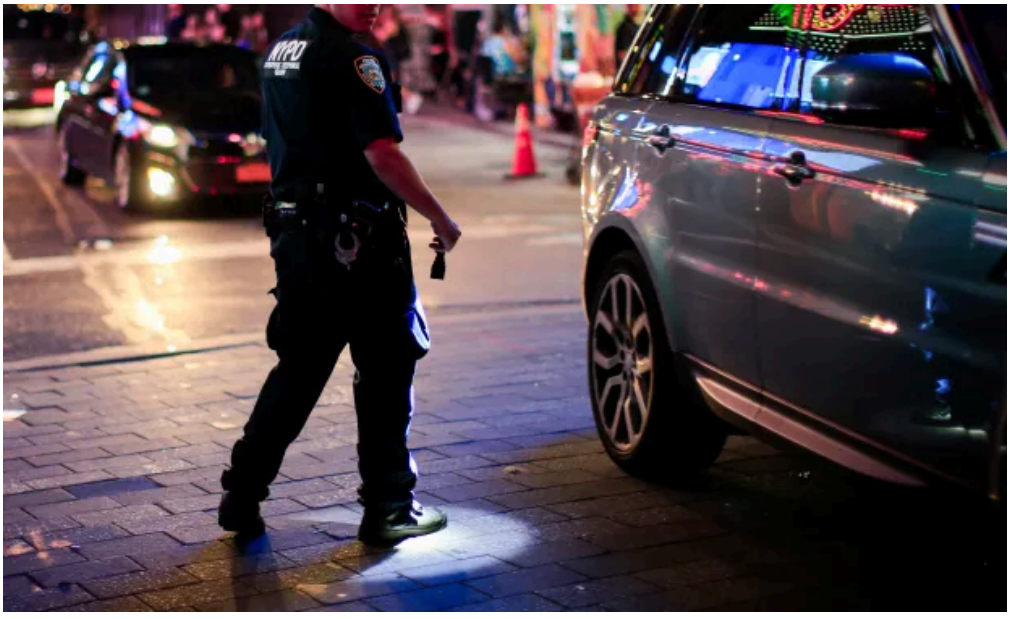
The officer do not necessarily conduct a formal stop or check IDs, the report

“Rather, their sustained silent presences communicate to residents that they are not welcome or permitted to remain, and residents report leaving as a result even though they are on their own property,” the report says.

Germain Thompson, the OCL’s independent community liaison, said hassling a group of people, even if the officer stops short of questioning or frisking anyone, damages the very trust police have talked about rebuilding and maintaining in certain neighborhoods.

“The encounters play out in a number of different ways, including where the officers don’t say anything and they don’t engage,” Thompson said. “The feedback we’re getting is: ‘Where do they expect us to hang out? I’m paying rent in a NYCHA building and I can’t go downstairs without being forced to leave the area.'”





An NYPD officer is pictured with his flashlight in 2019. (VIEWPRESS via Getty Images)

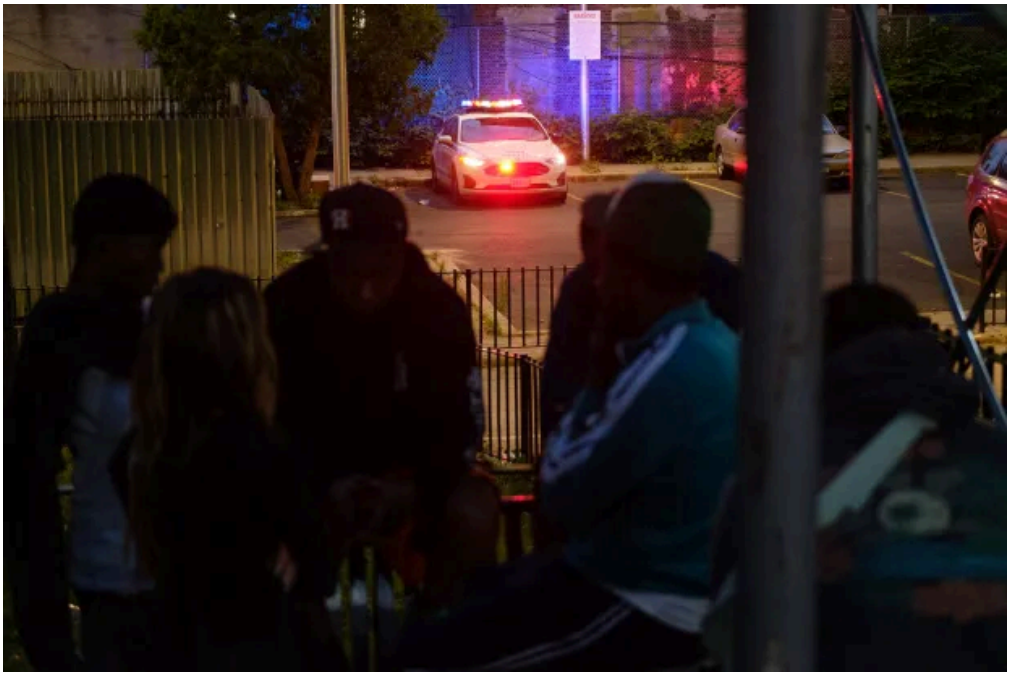
The report, the second of four quarterly reports for the year, does not cite a specific number of flashlight complaints, Thompson saying the accounts were shared with the OCL in confidence and that its role "is to document patterns for the monitor and the court, not to investigate or verify individual incidents."

Thompson said OCL has seen complaints about officers waving flashlights on a consistent basis for about two years from older NYCHA residents as well as young people.

"It's not a handful of times," he said. "We keep hearing it, in different parts of the city."

One complaint, according to an OCL staffer, came from a 19-year-old who said he was with a group of his friends at the Sumner Houses in Bedford-Stuyvesant one night in September when two uniformed officers approached.

One officer shoved him without saying a word, the staffer said, then both officers repeatedly waved their lit flashlights at the group. No one was arrested or summoned.



An NYPD cruiser sits with its flashing lights on as residents congregate outside the Howard Houses in Brownsville, Brooklyn. (Gardiner Anderson for New York Daily News)

The report said that the monitor, Myland Denerstein, was made aware of the flashlights complaints and other issues raised in the report. Thompson said the OCL has helped bring other issues to the monitor's attention, noting that the monitor's analysis of the NYPD's Community Response Team came after the OCL in an earlier report noted complaints that officers in the unit were overly aggressive.

The monitor did not respond to a request for comment.

An NYPD spokesperson acknowledged officers will use "the light from flashlights, if necessary, to disperse crowds."

Denerstein was appointed monitor in January 2022, three months after the death of the first monitor, Peter Zimroth, who was tapped in 2013 to fill that role by Judge Shira Scheindlin after she ruled the NYPD's stop and frisk tactics violated the constitutional rights of minorities.

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