

Three Haitian-Americans Now Lead NYPD Precincts, Marking Progress In Diversity

Community members, advocates say it's progress, but more needed to improve police-community relations

By Sam Bojarski



Left to right: Precinct commanders Derby St. Fort, Frantz Souffrant, Gaby Celiba. *Photos courtesy of NYPD.*

Illustration by Sam Bojarski

Last June, as Black Lives Matter protests erupted, Haitian-American police officers were on the other side of the NYPD barricades — often [facing jeers and insults](#) from demonstrators. Inside the department, the [Haitian American Law Enforcement Fraternal Organization](#) (HALEFO) has pushed for diversity within the top brass and carried out community service projects to build trust.

Now, three of the fraternal group's members — Deputy Inspector Gaby Celiba, Capt. Derby St. Fort and Capt. Frantz Souffrant — have taken command of the [67th](#), [61st](#) and [78th](#) precincts, respectively. While the promotions, which took effect Jan. 1, may signal a positive step in improving police-community relations in Brooklyn's largest Haitian enclaves, more work needs to be done, community members say.

Having three of the roughly 1,000 total Haitian-Americans in the NYPD commanding a precinct is historically unprecedented, said HALEFO President Claude Celestin. The NYPD has 77 precincts citywide.

"Every single Haitian officer can be inspired by that," said Celestin, an 18-year NYPD veteran, speaking on behalf of HALEFO. "We appreciate that we finally have a chance to be sitting at the table where we're

making [certain] decisions for the community, especially at the 67 [precinct].”

The 67th precinct commanded by Celiba, 38, encompasses East Flatbush and Remsen Village, and contains much of the area designated as Brooklyn's Little Haiti. Out of 106,500 people, more [than 11,100](#) Haitian-Americans live in the precinct per 2018 Census Bureau data, though the figure is likely an undercount of the immigrant population.

St. Fort, 41, commands the 61st precinct, encompassing Kings Bay, Sheepshead Bay, Gravesend and Manhattan Beach. Census estimates suggest that, of the more than 140,000 residents, [fewer than 1,000](#) Haitian-Americans live in these neighborhoods — again, likely an underestimate.

The 78th precinct, commanded by Souffrant, 40, and encompassing Park Slope, has [fewer than 500](#) Haitian-Americans among its total population of 74,700 people, per Census estimates.

“The police department is taking action,” said Alfred Titus, a former NYPD detective and professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

“They are following through on their promise to create a more diversified

police department and a police department where the members of the force can better relate to the community.”

While acknowledging the promotions as progress, Josue Pierre, a Democratic Party district leader whose 42nd District is in the 67th precinct, still remembers March 25, 2000. That was the day the [funeral](#) of Patrick Dorismond, an unarmed Haitian-American father fatally shot by police, turned violent in Flatbush. Other highly-critical police brutality incidents involving Haitian-Americans include the bathroom torture and severe assault of [Abner Louima](#) in 1997 and the [fatal shooting of Georgy Louisgene](#) in 2002.

“With that history, and now with more people from our community integrated into the force, it shows that despite the horrors we saw last year, that there are steps towards progress,” Pierre said.

A seat at the leadership table

Although the NYPD’s more than 34,500-member uniformed workforce is [majority non-white](#), the department has faced [criticism](#) for a lack of diversity in its upper ranks, above the captain level.

In the midst of the June 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, The City [published a report](#) on diversity within the NYPD that showed, from 2008 to June 2020, the share of Black personnel working at the captain rank grew from 3.8% to 10.4%. Black personnel above captain rose from 4.9% to 11.7%, according to the report.

As of January 2021, 10.3% of captains and 12.1% of NYPD uniform personnel holding a rank above captain were Black, per [NYPD data](#).



The 67th precinct, commanded by Gaby Celiba, encompasses much of Brooklyn's Little Haiti. *Photo by Sam Bojarski*

Celiba, who joined the NYPD in 2004, was promoted last year to deputy inspector, one rank above captain. Prior to taking charge of the 67th he commanded the 61st precinct since [May 2019](#), taking over that role when he was a captain.

Souffrant and St. Fort have served in the NYPD since 2005 and 2006 respectively, an NYPD spokesperson confirmed. NYPD officials [have said](#) that precinct commanders are determined based on their work history. Potential civilian complaints or civil suits are a factor in the decision.

Among the three commanders, Souffrant is listed in a Propublica database as having [one substantiated civilian complaint](#) dating back to 2010, when he was a patrol officer. Titus said that a single substantiated complaint is not a cause for concern as it does not constitute a pattern of misconduct.

Commanders have some authority over disciplinary action with officers in their precinct.

“They will be able to determine sooner rather than later when an officer needs retraining or when an officer needs to be moved to another community,” Titus said.

Complaints against subordinate officers, whether they arise through the Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB) or at the neighborhood level, are reviewed by commanders, giving them a measure of authority over how officers interact with community members, said Titus.

“To be able to communicate with officers that understand the culture and understand your language, that’s absolutely a plus for the community,” said Pierre, who is also a city council [candidate](#). “This doesn’t negate the fact that there is still a blue wall of silence, and there’s still such a thing as police culture.”

The NYPD did not respond to an email request for statements from the three commanding officers. An NYPD spokesperson declined to provide information about disciplinary actions, citing an active court order.

‘A long way to go’

The George Floyd murder in Minneapolis and nationwide [crackdowns](#) on protesters have frayed police community relations in cities across the country.



Monalisa Ferrari (far left) attends a school workshop with HALEFO members. *Photo courtesy of Monalisa Ferrari*

Over the past two years, East Flatbush resident and educator Monalisa Ferrari has partnered with HALEFO on gang violence prevention workshops, for Haitian-American families and students. The new precinct commander could build on these efforts and give them more credibility among youth and families.

Having an authority who understands cultural practices like [gagann](#) and cultural artifacts can also reduce the risk of an unnecessary arrest or a harmful confrontation with police, Ferrari also said.

"It definitely reduces the amount of misconceptions or myths and serves as a means of prevention from getting arrested," Ferrari said.

Ronald Auborg, an East New York resident who works in Flatbush, said he hopes the new commanders continue the progress that has been made with diversity.

"They need to put on the beat cops that reflect our community," Auborg, 59, said. "It's getting better but not to the point where [residents] feel comfortable when they are stopped."

In the 67th precinct, East Flatbush resident Garfield Peters said he hopes police improve their de-escalation tactics, even when dealing with unruly community members.

"The police sometimes, when they speak [to] the people, because they have the authority, they think that they are above the law," Peters, 54. "But nobody is above the law."

Commanding officers may have authority over discipline within the precinct. But it is up to NYPD leadership to enforce [substantiated complaints](#) from civilians, including those filed with the 15-member CCRB.

“There’s a long way to go,” said Pierre, who called for an elected CCRB and an independent prosecutor to enforce discipline. “Quite clearly, you can’t expect the police to police themselves, we saw [and] we’ve seen how that works out.

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