

# The Seventh Generation

“In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.”

—From *The Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy*

## Policing and Safe Streets

### *Where are the Planners?*

*Sylvia Morse*

THE MOVEMENT for racial justice and police reform has come to the fore nationally as protestors in Ferguson, Missouri, New York City and cities nationwide respond to police killings of unarmed black and brown people where they live. Debate among policymakers and in the media has focused on discriminatory policing and remedies within police departments and in the courts, but the problems—and solutions—do not end there.

While some planners are participating in the protests, are we connecting the issues to our work? Absent critical consideration of systemic racism, planning policy can compound existing inequalities and injustices.

The intersection between urban planning and policing is exemplified in New York City’s Vision Zero initiative to end traffic fatalities and debate over its policies. What are the implications of encouraging aggressive police intervention in otherwise progressive efforts to promote safe streets?



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### **New York City’s Vision Zero and the Police**

The aim of Vision Zero is to increase street safety through new street designs and infrastructure, reduced speed limits and greater traffic enforcement. The plan has been widely embraced by urban planners and pedestrian and bicycle advocates, but received pushback from some groups concerned with how policing affects neighborhoods and people of color. What underlies this criticism, and how does it concern planners?

The policing of low-level offenses, including traffic infractions like jaywalking or failure to signal, is at the center of debates about crime and social justice. These minor offenses, along with hopping a turnstile and drinking alcohol on a park bench, are often targeted by police departments as essential public safety and quality of life issues. Proponents of this approach, commonly known as “broken windows” policing, like New York City Police Commissioner William Bratton, argue that such enforcement reduces crime. Not only does it deter similar offenses, Bratton told *The New York Times*, but it also increases police interactions with people who might have committed many or more serious crimes.

Critics point to the lack of evidence that “broken windows” reduces crime, and to the discriminatory implementation of these policies, which have disproportionately affected the poor and people of color. Recent protests in New York City emphasize these challenges to “broken windows” police policies.

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ganization should be to prevent further abuses. This is a duty that must have a higher priority than business concerns. And it's on the table now."

Sperry offered a comparison to past human rights abuses: "What about the gas chambers used by the Nazi regime? Israel's Holocaust research center Yad Vashem has some of the design drawings for them on file. These were technically somewhat complex buildings – they had to handle toxic gas inside them without killing the executioners above the 'shower' rooms, which was an unprecedented design criterion for the time – that were designed by architects, much as the rest of the Nazi genocide program was managed by technical experts. Now, that was done before the establishment of the current international human rights system, but I think we all wish that average Germans had had more direction about how to resist the horrors that their own government was enrolling them in. And that's where civil society organizations like AIA are supposed to do their work. AIA calls itself a 'leadership' organization, it claims that members make decisions in the public interest, and that it stands for architecture improving our communities and our world. Well, human rights is a core part of the better world that we all hope to live in, and AIA just rejected that. This decision is a complete sell out."

ADPSR has posted the complete letter from AIA along with other documents on its website, [www.adpsr.org](http://www.adpsr.org). **P<sup>2</sup>**



## 7th Generation

### **Policing and Safe Streets after Ferguson: Where are the Planners?**

By Sylvia Morse

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The aggressive policing of minor offenses has tremendous social impacts, which include, briefly:

#### ***Increased arrest and incarceration rates of Blacks and Latinos, which contribute to poverty and inequality.***

Criminalizing and policing any activity, be it jaywalking, marijuana use or "furtive movements" (an act frequently cited in New York Police Department stop-and-frisk reports), increases people's interactions with the police and the likelihood of their arrest. Crackdowns on nonviolent offenses, primarily drug crimes, and tactics like stop, question and frisk, have all been linked to mass incarceration of Black and Latino people in the United States (as reported and examined at length by Michelle Alexander in her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, and by organizations like the ACLU). These police practices typically target Black and Latino men at rates that far exceed their representation in the population. Mass incarceration has been linked to a cycle of poverty, and to racial and socioeconomic inequality. Many activists and community members aware of these consequences, by looking at the data or personal experience, argue against policing as a solution to social problems.

#### ***Changes in who uses neighborhood spaces, and how.***

New York City has a history of policing particular groups or activities seen as threatening to the quality of life or safety in public spaces, from the squeegee men to subway panhandlers and performers. In the past year, viral videos and reports have shown the NYPD targeting teenage breakdancers in subway cars, sidewalk vendors and people barbecuing in front of their homes. The subjectivity of identifying quality-of-life infractions has troubling implications for the accessibility of public space, including what kinds of recreation, performance, and socializing—and participants—shall be allowed or criminalized. Some journalists and activist groups such as New Yorkers Against Bratton have pointed to connections between "broken windows" and gentrification; in downtown Los Angeles, for instance, the police department, guided by Bratton, began targeting the homeless in the rapidly developing neighborhood. Researchers have not yet established a clear link between policing and factors associated with gentrification, such as residential displacement or rising property values. Yet within gentrifying communities, there is a widespread



perception that law enforcement is often used to support speculative real estate development and, in turn, displacement.

**Trauma and death.**

The police response to a misdemeanor offense—or even a chaotic situation, a fight in the street or a poorly-lit stairwell—can escalate quickly. For people of color, these police interactions can be physically and emotionally brutal, and even deadly. This fact is widely documented and underscored by high-profile cases like those of Sean Bell, Amadou Diallo, Abner Louima, and Ramarley Graham, all victims of aggressive policing. Most recently, New York activists and organizations cited as evidence of the dangers of “broken windows” policing the death of Eric Garner, who was killed by police during an arrest (which was recorded on video and widely publicized) reportedly for the misdemeanor offense of selling untaxed cigarettes.

**Fear and distrust of police and government.**

Uneven surveillance and law enforcement across neighborhoods and demographic groups supports perceptions of policing as racist and unequal. Frequent instances of police misconduct and brutality cause emotional pain and instill mortal fear in many people of color, a reality widely expressed at the protests in New York, Ferguson and cities nationwide (most vividly in the refrain, “Black Lives Matter”). The result is not only poor community-police relations, in which people are less likely to cooperate with police investigations, but in a deeper fear and distrust of government and current leadership to protect all people’s civil liberties and wellbeing.

In sum, present police practice is unjust and a danger to black and brown lives. Thus, for many New York residents and activists concerned with the detrimental effects of “broken windows” policing and the need for structural reform of the NYPD, Vision Zero’s increased traffic enforcement is seen as a potential threat to public safety, not an aid.



Photos: Sylvia Morse

Scenes from Martin Luther King, Jr. Day March. January 19, 2015, in Harlem, NY.

The data, while limited, lend support to these concerns. More than six months since the launch of Vision Zero, data show an increase in the enforcement of reckless driving and other traffic violations. The increase in stops and ticketing is un-

even across parts of the city (along with other low-level offenses). Police watchdog and reform groups cite anecdotal reports of jaywalking crackdowns, including an instance in which an elderly man was injured and detained when stopped for

jaywalking, and new traffic checkpoints in poor neighborhoods and near public housing. Additional data and analysis are needed to identify any patterns in traffic enforcement, but concerns are rooted in the well-documented unequal implementation and harmful implications of “broken windows” policing.

### Safe Streets and Racial Justice

The fact that many people feel alienated—or worse, threatened—by Vision Zero should give pause to those attempting to build a broad base for transportation planning and safety. Moreover, the impact of incarceration and policing on racial, social and economic inequality must concern planners committed to social justice.

Yet planners in New York City, by and large, are not talking to each other about policing related to Vision Zero, if at all. This conversation gap is likely rooted in a number of factors, including lack of diversity in the field and in the pedestrian and cyclist advocacy movements, as well as professional silos. Working for justice will require tackling racism and white privilege within planning policy and the field.

Protecting human health and welfare is the central purpose of urban planning. These are the same goals of anti-racism activists and those demonstrating to end racism and brutality in the criminal justice system. If critical discussions of these issues are not part of our work, then what work are we doing? **P<sup>2</sup>**



Photo: Farah Egai



Photo: Sylvia Morse

**TOP**  
Millions March NYC, Downtown Manhattan, December 13, 2014

**BOTTOM**  
March for Eric Garner, Staten Island, NY, August 23, 2014