

# ***Arrests Expose Rift Between N.Y.P.D. and ‘Violence Interrupters’***

An outreach worker trained to intervene in street conflicts was hospitalized after he and a colleague were arrested amid an altercation with the police.

**By Maria Cramer and Hurubie Meko**

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For years, New York City has employed a two-pronged approach to reducing gun violence, relying on the police and on the publicly funded conflict mediators known as violence interrupters, who try to defuse disputes before they escalate, including into gunfire.

But the **February arrests of two interrupters** has caused simmering tensions with the police to boil over and threatens to undermine a key part of Mayor Eric Adams’s approach to curbing shootings and murders.

The two sides share a fundamental goal, despite their strikingly different methods. Where officers have the power to arrest, interrupters, often former gang members who in some cases have served prison time, rely on street credibility to steer people from crime.

Over the past year, though, interrupters say officers have cursed at them; shoved them out of the way when they tried to break up fights; and arrested them for minor offenses. Then, on Feb. 9, two members of Save Our Streets, a longtime anti-violence group in Brooklyn’s Crown Heights section, said officers had handcuffed them after they tried to calm a man being detained for drug possession.

At the time, the two, Mark Johnson and his supervisor, Dequann Stanley, were wearing clothing that identified them as outreach workers. Still, a swarm of officers dragged them to the ground, according to video of the arrests reviewed by The Times, with some punching and kicking Mr. Stanley.

“I just felt so helpless,” he said in an interview.

Mr. Stanley sustained a gash on his forehead and bruised ribs and spent hours with his ankle shackled to a hospital gurney. He and Mr. Johnson received summonses for disorderly conduct that were later dismissed.

They have indicated in court documents filed by their lawyer, M.K. Kaishian, that they plan to sue the city. Since December, two other interrupters have notified the city of their plans to sue over what they say were false arrests stemming from other encounters.

The arrests and ensuing fallout pose a challenge to Mr. Adams’ public safety strategy, which leans heavily on expanding the use of interrupters, a community-based supplement to traditional policing that has taken root in other major U.S. cities.

Although studies indicate the presence of interrupters can help reduce crime and gun violence, some rank-and-file officers are less accepting of their presence. The resistance, policing experts said, arises from suspicions about the criminal records of some outreach workers, including some who have been convicted of serious crimes.

“Some of the most effective violence interrupters aren’t far removed from the violence,” said Brandon del Pozo, an assistant professor of medicine at Brown University and a former New York Police Department precinct commander. “Their commitment to ending it is what makes them valuable. But that also is viewed with skepticism.”

The Police Department declined to comment on the arrests or on its interactions with interrupters more broadly, and also declined requests for officers’ body camera footage of the Feb. 9 altercation, citing the pending litigation.

The confrontation involving Mr. Johnson and Mr. Stanley shook members of other interrupter groups, which operate under the city’s Crisis Management System. The system, a network of programs geared toward reducing gun violence, is independent of the Police Department and run by the Department of Youth and Community Development.

Less than a week after Mr. Stanley and Mr. Johnson were arrested, some police leaders tried to mend the relationship at a meeting with dozens of interrupters.

The gathering was arranged to discuss dealing with potential violence over the summer. Some outreach workers who attended expressed disappointment that officials did not apologize for the arrests of Mr. Stanley and Mr. Johnson.

Courtney Bryan, the executive director of the Center for Justice Innovation, which runs Save Our Streets, said in a statement that her organization had met with the police and city leaders about the arrests “to ensure our staff and all violence interrupters are treated as the indispensable, skilled partners they are.”

City officials plan additional meetings between the two sides, more funding for violence-interruption programs and training for the police and outreach workers “to form better partnerships,” a spokeswoman for Mr. Adams said in a statement.

“This vital work will produce the best outcomes if our officers and violence interrupters continue to work together,” the spokeswoman, Kayla Mamelak, said.

Interrupters said they were not sure why tensions with the police had increased, but many believe officers have become more aggressive amid the “defund the police” movement and other calls for criminal justice reform.

“I don’t think the rank and file get it,” said A.U. Hogan, whose title is chief of streets at Life Camp, a Queens anti-violence group. “A lot of them are threatened by the work we do.”

The Police Benevolent Association, which represents rank-and-file officers, declined to comment. Privately, officers say some interrupters interfere with arrests, attracting crowds and increasing tension on the streets.

Officers see themselves as the “legal arm of the government that is supposed to confront violence,” while violence interrupters are supposed to work more “upstream” to prevent violence, said Ian Adams, an assistant professor at the University of South Carolina’s Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice and a former police officer in Utah.



S.O.S. members at a memorial service for Troy Gill, 13, in February. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

In the heat of the moment, it can be difficult for officers to discern who is who in a scene, Professor Adams said.

“While there’s something active going on right now, that’s going to be the police’s role,” he said. “And if they’re perceiving that as interference, then, from a policy perspective, we have to figure out where these groups belong and where their appropriate place is.”

Conflicts between the police and interrupters also emerge when interrupters are charged with crimes. Michael Rodriguez, the former director of Bronx Rises Against Violence, an anti-violence program, was indicted in Orange County, N.Y.,

last year on charges that included gun and cocaine possession.

Kenneth Corey, a former chief of the New York Police Department, said that when he was the commander of a Staten Island precinct from 2018 to 2020, shootings fell 50 percent in a year. He credited the drop in large part to violence interrupters.

Generally speaking, he said, some tension stems from officers expecting interrupters to act as informers, and then becoming frustrated when they do not share information.

“Police don’t really understand what violence interrupters do,” Mr. Corey, who retired in 2022, said.

Tiffany Burgess, an outreach worker with the Brooklyn group Brownsville In Violence Out, filed a claim against the city after she was charged with disorderly conduct in November.

On the night in question, she said, she went to a barbershop after work and was there with other neighborhood residents when the police came in. Officers accused the crowd of smoking, drinking and gambling with dice, and demanded identification, according to her court filing.

Ms. Burgess, who was wearing her work identification badge at the time, was arrested after declining to provide a state-issued ID. She was held at the precinct for more than an hour, her wrists and ankles shackled. The charge was later dismissed.

The police, she said, “don’t care for us to be in the neighborhood.”

“We’re not trying to be police officers,” she said. “We’re trying to get the crime rate down. We’re trying to help them.”



At the memorial for her son, Mary Culbertson, center, comforted other children as violence interrupters from S.O.S. spoke and led prayers. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

The violence-interrupter concept took its current form in New York in 2014, when Mayor Bill de Blasio and the City Council formed the crisis management system to organize interrupter groups. Such groups now operate in more than 30 areas of the city. Mr. Adams, a former police captain, announced \$86 million in funding for the system in the 2024 fiscal year.

Cities like Baltimore, Chicago and St. Louis have made similar investments. In 2021, the Justice Department announced \$444 million in grants for violence reduction, including intervention programs.

Overall, the interrupter model appears to be effective, according to a 2017 study by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. In one Bronx neighborhood, the number of shooting victims fell 63 percent during a period when interrupters were active compared with rates before the program began, the study found.

The results show that the approach should be adopted in “any city trying to get a handle on gun violence,” said Jeffrey Butts, who worked on the study and is the director of the college’s Research and Evaluation Center.

Interrupters talk to victims and perpetrators of gun violence; defuse conflicts; and broker delicate truces. The work can be dangerous. In January, an interrupter in Brownsville was shot and wounded while on the job, a year after another outreach worker in the neighborhood was shot under similar circumstances. In Baltimore, three violence interrupters were killed from 2021 to 2022.

As for Mr. Stanley, two weeks after his arrest he was too anxious to return to work. It was one thing, he said, to worry about being hurt stopping a conflict between people on the street.

“But then to think about dealing with the N.Y.P.D. as well,” he said. “I just feel like I can’t do my job the way I felt like I could.”

Although not fully back to work, he volunteered to help preside over a vigil for Troy Gill, a 13-year-old boy who was fatally shot on Feb. 29 while returning home to Crown Heights after a Brooklyn Nets game.

As he moved through the crowd, mourners shook his hand or hugged him. Then, a cruiser parked nearby, and two officers got out.

Mr. Stanley stood in the middle of the playground, not far away. All three watched the crowd silently.

**Maria Cramer** is a Times reporter covering the New York Police Department and crime in the city and surrounding areas. More about Maria Cramer

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