Joo-Hyun Kang is the director of Communities United for Police Reform (CPR), a campaign to end discriminatory policing practices in New York, which comprises over sixty organizational members from all five boroughs. Members include the Audre Lorde Project, Brooklyn Movement Center, Bronx Defenders, Center for Constitutional Rights, CAAAV Organizing Asian Communities, DRUM South Asian Organizing Center, FIERCE, Justice Committee, Legal Aid Society, Make the Road NY, Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, New York Civil Liberties Union, Picture the Homeless, Streetwise and Safe, VOCAL-NY, and many others. Kang is a longtime organizer in New York City; she was a program director at Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice and the first staff member and director of the Audre Lorde Project, an organizing center for LGBTST (lesbian, gay, bisexual, two-spirit, and transgender) and gender-nonconforming communities of color.

Camp: Since 2012 CPR has led mass mobilizations in response to several high-profile police killings, such as the murders of Ramarley Graham and Eric Garner. Your demands include justice for the families of those slain by police and an end to broken windows policing. Why is ending broken windows policing key to your organizing response to police violence?

Kang: Many of us who are active now were influenced or mentored by the late Richie Perez. Richie was a former Young Lord and co-founder
of the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights’ Justice Committee (now known as the Justice Committee). Richie used to say that police killings are just the tip of the iceberg. They are tragedies and must be organized around, but they are ultimately enabled by the daily abuses, disrespect, and human rights violations faced by our communities at the hands of NYPD officers that go unaddressed. When we don’t deal with these daily abuses, it’s no wonder that there’s a lack of accountability in high-profile killings. Particular communities are targeted for disproportionate and discriminatory policing. The huge abuses of stop and frisk resulted from racial profiling, gender and sexual orientation profiling, profiling of people who are homeless and young, and anti-immigrant profiling. Back in 2011 there were close to 700,000 reported stops.

By targeting particular communities and going after minor offenses and minor infractions in those communities, police resources are dedicated to the mistaken theory that broken windows policing heads off violence. Hyper-aggressive enforcement of minor nonviolent infractions that targets communities of color doesn’t make any of our communities safer. In reality, as community members and New Yorkers know, violence prevention has to be undertaken by all parts of the community. It’s not only the police who are engaged in violence prevention. We believe it is more effective to build up community infrastructure to maintain safe communities than it is to rely solely on police.

**Heatherton:** The current CPR campaign against broken windows policing is being led by people of color, queer, transgender, gender-nonconforming, two-spirit, immigrant, homeless, and youth-led groups in the city. This is not the first time such an alliance has emerged against William Bratton-style policies. How were people confronting broken windows policing when it was first implemented in the 1990s, when Bratton was police commissioner?

**Kang:** At that time in the mid-1990s, when broken windows theory was formally introduced and branded “broken windows policing,” there was a big public push to go after “quality of life” offenses. Grassroots organizations rooted in communities of color in New York came together to ask, “Whose quality of life are we focusing on?” It didn’t seem like the
quality of life of all New Yorkers was being uplifted. If that were the case we wouldn't have seen budget cuts around education. We wouldn't have seen budget cuts around health and human services. What we would have seen is a reinvestment in community infrastructure in all the different ways that contribute to safety. That includes housing, health care, education, and employment.

Back in the mid-1990s there was a grassroots coalition called the Coalition Against Police Brutality that included the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights, CAAAV Organizing Asian Communities, and Audre Lorde Project. At different times there were also other organizations that made up the core, including Sista II Sista, Youth Force, and Forever in Struggle Together. Much of the work in that period was supporting families of those killed by the NYPD, educating our communities, mobilizing around racial violence, as well as organizing around specific cases of police brutality like the brutal beating of JaLea Lamot, a trans woman, and her family by NYCHA (New York City Housing Authority) officers. We were also trying to promote this idea that in order for New Yorkers to have safety and quality of life, we needed to respect the dignity of all New Yorkers. After the rape and torture of Abner Louima by NYPD officers and the killing of Amadou Diallo in a hail of forty-one police bullets, those organizations pulled together a broader coalition, which at that point was called People Justice 2000—knowing that both cases would have trials in 2000 and that those moments would offer an opportunity to organize to expose the systemic racism and lack of police accountability that enabled both tragedies. Separate from those two cases, there was a multi-strategy campaign that included direct action as well as a courtroom strategy. Richie Perez, along with members of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and others in the Coalition Against Police Brutality, went to the Center for Constitutional Rights to ask that they file a lawsuit against the NYPD's stop-and-frisk practices and racial profiling that resulted in the killing of Amadou Diallo. We specifically targeted the Street Crimes Unit (SCU) on the legal side as well as in the street organizing because at that point SCU was the unit responsible for the most stops in New York. We knew that the people primarily being targeted were young people of color, the homeless, and others who are
seen as marginalized, and that the reasons for the stops weren’t legal. The stops were part of the broken windows strategy that targeted particular communities. The work that folks did in the late 1990s into the early 2000s was really trying to push back on that.

Heatherton: How has this long history of intersectional organizing in New York City impacted the most recent rounds of struggle? How, specifically, have questions of race, class, gender, and sexuality informed CRP’s critique of police violence and state violence?

Karg: Whenever we’re looking at a new rollout of NYPD policies —whether it’s the version of broken windows being rebranded as “neighborhood policing” or ongoing stop-and-frisk abuses—what’s important to us is being clear about and uplifting the experiences and perspectives of communities that are directly affected. We’re trying to bring clarity across communities that young people of color who identify as LGBT or are gender-nonconforming are experiencing something very specific in particular parts of the city, such as the West Village. Trans Latinas in Jackson Heights are experiencing policing in a particular way. People who are homeless have different experiences in different parts of the city and yet the abuses that individuals face are very similar. Bringing that all together for us is what helps us understand the broader picture. It informs our strategy of ending discriminatory and abusive policing.

Since discriminatory and abusive policing is systemic, our strategy needs to be multi-pronged. For us that means we have to coordinate among different tactics, and we need to be creative in the tactics we use. We can’t only rely on policy advocacy. Policy advocacy, as far as we’re concerned, is a tool. It’s a very important tool, but that’s what it is. It’s a tool that, if integrated as part of a community organizing strategy, can help strengthen organizations, build the power of communities, increase movement building, create broader awareness of the problem and potential solutions, and get more New Yorkers engaged. Our broader strategy includes training people to document and observe police misconduct, also known as “copwatch.” There are copwatch teams that our groups—particularly the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and the
Justice Committee—coordinate across the city. Our member groups do “Know Your Rights” trainings throughout the city with a framework that looks at what we call “the three Rs.” We look at not only what people’s rights are and what laws govern police interactions, but also what reality people of color experience regardless of their rights, and what our responsibilities are individually and collectively to address that. This is also why we incorporate civic engagement work, research, litigation, legal support and communications work into the broader strategy.

We know that the deep crisis of police violence and lack of police accountability doesn’t exist only in New York. It’s national. What we’ve seen in the past year is a growing awareness of this crisis, but it’s not a new crisis. We know that it will be a very long, protracted struggle to truly transform conditions so that all New Yorkers can be safe and be treated with dignity and respect.

C zarap: Mayor Bill de Blasio successfully appealed to New Yorkers’ frustration with the NYPD’s racist policing. In fact, he was one of several candidates who campaigned to end stop-and-frisk abuses. Yet, early on in his administration, he rehired police commissioner William Bratton, who had held the position twenty years before under Rudolph Giuliani. Bratton has continued broken windows policing while asserting that it is entirely distinct from the policy of stop and frisk. How has CPR responded to Bratton’s return, and what do you make of Bratton’s attempt to distinguish between broken windows policing and stop and frisk?

Kang: The commissioner’s attempt to make a distinction between stop and frisk and broken windows policing is pretty ludicrous. Discriminatory stop-and-frisk abuses come directly out of the framework of broken windows theory that the NYPD has employed for the past two decades. It didn’t fall from the sky. It’s part and parcel of a broader strategy that relies on discriminatory and abusive targeting of particular communities. When we look at the specifics of how broken windows is carried out, it’s basically the selective police enforcement of regulations against minor offenses—nonviolent offenses—that disproportionately impacts particular communities. One example is riding
your bike on the sidewalk. If you’re riding your bike on the sidewalk in Bedford-Stuyvesant you’re more likely to get a ticket, maybe even get arrested, than if you are riding your bike on the sidewalk just a few miles down in Park Slope in Brooklyn.\(^1\) It’s the same thing with open container violations—having alcohol in open containers in public. People have been ticketed on their own stoops of brownstones in Brooklyn, for example, for having a can of beer in front of their own homes. In Central Park, you’re generally not going to see folks being ticketed or hassled by the NYPD for having a picnic with glasses of champagne. Part of our job is to point out what this kind of discriminatory and abusive treatment is, why it doesn’t contribute to the safety of New Yorkers, and to end these practices.

**Camp:** Recently, CPR has been campaigning against the city’s budget proposal to add 1,300 new police officers; you’ve pointed out that the NYPD already constitutes the largest police force in the country. Why has CPR been opposing this proposal? How else could the city use its resources to improve the safety and security of the poor and people of color?

**Kang:** Unfortunately, this was not a victory for us since they did decide to increase the NYPD head count by 1,300. They also civilianized 400 additional positions, so additional desk duty cops will be moved to the streets. Even so, what we are still trying to achieve in New York City is an improvement to safety. This is a multi-pronged and long-term effort.

We can’t really talk about improving safety without addressing material conditions. This is what we did when the plan to hire 1,000 new NYPD officers was first unveiled. We identified other places in the city budget that needed to be increased that could contribute to safety in a better way. We included things like fully funding summer youth employment, which the current budget does not do. We also advocated for increasing the amount of truly affordable housing, not “affordable housing”

\(^1\) Bedford-Stuyvesant is a historically Black working-class neighborhood in New York City; Park Slope is a neighborhood with a much higher proportion of white and wealthy people.
based on abstract numbers that don’t actually relate to what most New Yorkers make and how much it costs to live in the city. We included full employment, not only for young people but also for adults. Finally, we included guidance counselors, arts and sports programs, fully funding transformative justice and other kinds of programs in all the schools. All of this, we think, would contribute to a healthy and safe New York more than increasing the head count of the NYPD.

Part of the challenge now is that there is a lack of oversight over the increased head count and also over the 400 civilianized positions. New Yorkers know that officers are often placed on desk duty for specific reasons—some of them, for example, have abusive histories and misconduct claims filed against them. Desk duty is where people are often assigned after civilian complaints have been lodged. We’re very concerned that there is no public record of which officers are being moved from desk to street.

Heather: I’d like to invite you to reflect on GPR’s biggest struggles as well as the biggest victories that you’ve encountered when organizing against police violence. What can organizers across the country learn from your experience in New York?

Kang: Those of us in New York are learning all the time from organizers around the country. I definitely want to be clear that we don’t think we’re the only game in the country on this. It’s really important for us to maintain regular communication with other campaigns in the US because we all have a lot to learn from each other and share with each other. We also really need to move some national-level strategy. Lack of police accountability is a national problem, and communities are impacted similarly across the country.

We’re a pretty new campaign. We launched in the early part of 2012, so we’re about three and a half years old. So far we’ve been able to help to build a cohesive coordinated campaign across sectors throughout New York City. Before 2012, fights against police abuse in New York City were largely in different silos. The legal organizations might have been communicating with each other, and the policy advocates did some work together, and some of the grassroots organizations worked together, but
there was very little crossover across sector in terms of trying to develop a coordinated strategy. We’ve not only developed a coordinated strategy, we also center and prioritize the perspectives and leadership of directly affected communities. That’s something that’s central to the way we do our work.

The types of solutions we’re trying to uplift, whether we’re talking about copwatch and Know Your Rights or about defining community safety so that we’re accounting for the core conditions that make our communities less safe or about policy solutions, are coming from grassroots activists and directly affected community members from across the city. The legislative and policy initiatives that we support are coming from directly affected people saying, “This is a problem that needs to be fixed”—and then framing what the policy fix should be.

There are a few victories I’d like to reflect on. One of the specific changes we’ve helped to achieve is that reported stops have decreased dramatically. This is a direct result of New Yorkers basically saying “Enough! The NYPD’s stop-and-frisk program is the largest racial profiling program in the country. This is clearly discriminatory and abusive and it needs to stop.”

We believe the huge reduction in reported stops was a result of some of the tactics and strategies we were able to coordinate. The city council’s passage of the Community Safety Act (which was two laws that established an NYPD oversight framework and which became law after a big campaign to override the veto of then-mayor Michael Bloomberg) was a huge accomplishment because it was very grassroots-driven. There really hadn’t been much legislation related to the NYPD in the past several decades by the city council so the fact that grassroots organizations like Picture the Homeless, Make the Road New York, Streetwise and Safe, copwatch teams, and others helped make this victory real is really significant.

The court victory that Center for Constitutional Rights and the plaintiffs were able to achieve in _Floyd et al. v. City of New York_—the big federal class action stop-and-frisk lawsuit—was very connected to the attorneys’ work in the courtroom but also the huge community involvement. Community members from across New York City packed the courts every day for nine weeks and held actions in neighborhoods
and in front of the courthouse pretty consistently. In fact, a number of the key plaintiffs and witnesses were members of different organizations, including the lead plaintiff David Floyd, who is a member of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement. In fact, members of MXGM were also lead plaintiffs in the prior Daniels lawsuit.

More recently, thanks to the leadership and tireless work over the past several months of families of New Yorkers who were killed by police and our members and partners who stood by them, Governor Cuomo was pushed to sign an executive order authorizing the New York State Attorney General's office to act as special prosecutor in cases of police killings. This recent victory is something we reflect on as being decades in the making. It was a core demand of families whose loved ones were killed by the NYPD in the 1990s, including Iris Baez, the mother of Anthony Baez, and Margarita Rosario, the mother of Anthony Rosario and aunt of Hilton Vega—co-founders of Parents Against Police Brutality. Iris and Margarita, along with the families of Eric Garner, Ramarley Graham, Shantel Davis, Kimani Gray, Mohamed Bah, Sean Bell, Jayson Tirado, Alberta Spruill, and others came together in the past several months, organizing with the Justice Committee, one of our leadership organizations, to be part of and help to lead a tightly coordinated campaign to secure a special prosecutor in New York State.

There's much more work to be done, and no one is under the illusion that any of these victories are a final solution. What they represent are steps to changing conditions in our neighborhoods, building our collective skills and power to create the city we want to live in, where everyone is treated with dignity and respect.

Across the board, we've been able to implement strategies in different ways by centering the work, experiences, perspective, and leadership of directly affected people and grassroots community-based organizations. In the long term, our theory of change relies on the idea that we've got to build strong, fighting community infrastructure—not only in terms of core services needed in different communities, but really an engaged and politically developed core of folks in different organizations throughout New York City in different neighborhoods who are going to be able to maintain and sustain a campaign and work against police violence regardless of what other citywide organizational forms exist.