

# Shifting gears on stop-and-frisk

Mayoral candidate Cherelle Parker cites the gun-violence crisis. Opponents say it could be "terribly harmful."



Cherelle Parker talks with voters after a mayoral forum this month. She has expressed openness to police using stop-and-frisk as a legal means of combating crime.

**By Chris Palmer and Anna Orso (Staff Writers)**

Three years ago, then-City Councilmember Cherelle Parker drafted a resolution asking voters to ban illegal use of the policing tactic known as stop-and-frisk, a largely ceremonial gesture she marked by issuing a news release saying there was “no correlation between the elimination of stops and frisks and an increase in violent crime.”

But last year, as shootings continued to leave residents killed or wounded at a record pace for the third straight year, Parker — who by then was preparing to run for mayor — held a news conference to declare that legal use of the tactic should be revisited.

”We are in the middle of a crisis, and we have to use every tool that we have to get illegal guns off the street,” she said.

With the Democratic primary just weeks away, and residents overwhelmingly in agreement that crime is the top priority facing Philadelphia’s next mayor, Parker has positioned herself as the candidate most open to combating gun violence by deploying stop-and-frisk. The strategy typically encourages officers to stop people on the streets if the officer has “reasonable suspicion” the person’s behavior could be connected to a crime.

Parker has avoided providing specifics about what her approach might look like. She’s declined to say if she would encourage officers to make more stops, provide incentives to boost the number of stops, or even if she believes more stops would be an effective violence-reduction strategy.

In an interview this week, Parker would not say whether police should adjust the current number of pedestrian stops, saying: “I reject the narrative of the more or the less.” She framed the use of stop-and-frisk as just one part of her public-safety plan, which also includes directing more officers to patrol on foot or bike.

“Under a Parker administration, every legal tool available, every constitutional tool available to our Police Department will be employed to ensure that we end this sense of lawlessness,” she said. “And I’m no flip-flopper about it.”

The American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania on Thursday hosted a briefing with reporters to express dismay that stop-and-frisk was once again being debated by candidates running for mayor.

Mary Catherine Roper, a civil rights attorney who formerly worked at the ACLU, said there are echoes of the 2007 mayoral campaign, when then-candidate Michael Nutter advocated for the practice. After he was elected, stop-and-frisk soared, and its use, along with other strategies, coincided with the city’s lowest homicide rate in 50 years.

But Roper said the practice was not only racially biased, it was ineffective, with officers rarely finding illegal guns or drugs and frequently inconveniencing — if not antagonizing — Black and brown residents who had done nothing wrong. The ACLU sued in 2010 because police were overwhelmingly stopping people of color, often without legal justification.

The city agreed to let the ACLU monitor the practice, and in 2020, Mayor Jim Kenney's administration said it would take further action to address ongoing racial disparities.

“It was terribly harmful to communities, and it did not bring the benefits it was intended to,” Roper said. “It does not get guns off the street, and it is very harmful to the community.”

Jerry Ratcliffe, a Temple University criminologist who has studied some of the Police Department's policies, said he doesn't believe the widespread, indiscriminate use of pedestrian stops ever will — or should — return.

But even spurring a moderate uptick in legal pedestrian stops could be difficult for a mayor to achieve, he said: Pedestrian stops in the city have been plummeting for years — from about 200,000 in 2015, the last year of Nutter's administration, to fewer than 10,000 last year, according to city statistics. And elected officials from Kenney to District Attorney Larry Krasner and City Council members have each expressed varying degrees of support for that curtailment.

Ratcliffe said the rank-and-file is keenly aware of that political reality, which could make it difficult to swing the pendulum back in the other direction.

“Stopping somebody ... is largely a discretionary activity. Officers can choose to do it or not,” Ratcliffe said. “And they've had multiple years of getting very clear signals from the city's politicians that that has been frowned upon. And I don't think you can easily turn it around with a memo from City Hall.”

Pedestrian stops are a legally authorized method by which police can stop and search people as long as the officer has “reasonable suspicion” the person may be involved in criminal activity — a lower standard than the probable cause required for an arrest.

But the tactic gained renewed attention in the early 2000s, when departments in cities including Philadelphia and New York began heavily

emphasizing the strategy and essentially branded it stop-and-frisk, encouraging officers to be proactive and search scores of pedestrians to drive down crime.

Former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg championed the practice and said it was helping reduce violence there. But in 2013, a judge ruled the policy unconstitutional because of racial inequities, saying the practice amounted to “a policy of indirect racial profiling.” Pedestrian stops in the city were quickly slashed, and crime there continued to fall.

The drop in pedestrian stops was not as immediate in Philadelphia, but in the decade since the ACLU’s lawsuit, the practice has been in steep decline.

Gun violence, meanwhile, has been on a generally steady uptick since 2016 before reaching record heights over the last three years. And some researchers have contended that a drop in so-called proactive policing — such as discretionary pedestrian stops — has contributed to that surge (that conclusion is a matter of debate; other experts have said violence spiked nationwide due to factors as varied as pandemic-related societal disruption, economic upheaval, record-level gun sales, and widespread political and social unrest).

Last summer, as shootings continued at an alarming pace, Parker held the news conference at which she floated the notion that the city should revisit its stance on stop-and-frisk. She was backed by several other Council members, including the body’s president, Darrell L. Clarke.

Parker said her suggestion did not conflict with the bill she promoted in 2020 to change the City Charter and ban unconstitutional stops and frisks — a largely symbolic step because the bill was outlawing something that was, by definition, illegal.

In this week’s interview, Parker insisted she had been consistent in her public statements on the topic, saying she’s always been against unconstitutional stops. She said she would have no tolerance for “misuse or abuse” by police.

“I am a mother of a 10-year-old Black son,” she said. “And that talk that Black mothers and fathers have to have with their children, particularly their boys, we had that talk with our son. And I want him to live in the safest city possible.”

Roper, the former ACLU attorney, said the renewed focus on the subject is why advocates felt the need to speak up about what they view as a generally ineffective practice.

The mayor sets the Police Department's priorities, Roper said, and if increasing stops and frisks is one of them, "people should know: We did that. We tried that. It was terribly harmful to the community, and it did not bring the benefits it was intended to."

Staff writer Dylan Purcell contributed to this article.

[cpalmer@inquirer.com](mailto:cpalmer@inquirer.com) and [aorso@inquirer.com](mailto:aorso@inquirer.com)

[cs\\_palmer](#) and [anna\\_orso](#)

215-854-2817