

Radio host: From a movie theater in Colorado to a playground in the Bronx, gun violence is very much a part of the national conversation. Three weeks ago, a Kevlar vest saved the life of officer Brian Groves, who was shot while conducting a vertical patrol in public housing on the Lower East Side. The patrols are common; police start at the top of a building and go floor by floor, searching hallways and stairwells for criminal activity. They often stop and frisk young men to look for guns and ask for ID.

Sixteen-year-old Radio Rookie Tamitayo Fagbenle reports on vertical patrol policing in public housing.

Tamitayo Fagbenle: Growing up, my parents used to tell me to stay away from the projects, and until now, I had never been inside a public housing building, but Dereese Huff has been living in Campos Plaza for 33 years.

Fagbenle: So do you regularly see cops in your building?

Huff: Very frequently lately, yes.

Dereese is a tenant leader here at the Campos Plaza public housing development, just blocks away from where Officer Groves was shot while doing a vertical patrol a few weeks ago.

Huff: Me personally, I want the cops here doing the verticals. These young kids carry a lot of things they shouldn't be carrying.

Dereese isn't alone in thinking this. In 2011, the New York City Housing Authority did a survey of public housing residents on the Lower East Side, and 60 percent said they would like a larger police presence. But I heard differently from young men in the neighborhood.

Fagbenle: Can you introduce yourself, please?

Garcia: Sure, my name is Antonio Garcia.

He described what it's like to be stopped and searched in your own home.

Garcia: As soon as you walk in, you know, they'll just ask you to stand against the wall, and they won't even explain half the time why they're searching you. After that, they'll just pat you down, pat your pockets. They'll check your sneakers, and then they'll ask you for ID after.

Rosenbloom: In this country, we're not required to carry identification. Hard to believe, isn't it?

Nancy Rosenbloom is a lawyer from the Legal Aid Society. Legal Aid and NAACP argue that vertical patrols infringe on people's constitutional rights. They're suing the police department and the City of New York.

Rosenbloom: Two of our clients, one is an elderly man who was sick, he was bedridden. His nephew got arrested for coming to visit his uncle and bringing him his meals because he didn't happen to be carrying ID that day. They arrested him for trespassing. The police officer never knocked on the uncle's door. Instead they just arrested him, he spent the night in jail, and his uncle didn't get to eat for a couple days.

A lot of the people I talked to who live in the housing projects feel like the vertical patrols are discriminatory, but they didn't even seem outraged by it because it happens so much. But Dereese told me she feels like the bad stuff that the cops do is justified because of the bad stuff the kids do.

Huff: I'm sure some cops harass them, but it weighs it out. I'm being honest, it weighs it out.

Last year, one in five murders and shootings happened at or near a project. After Officer Groves was shot at three weeks ago, Commissioner Ray Kelly came out defending the need for vertical patrols.

Kelly: About 4 percent of New York's residents live in public housing. About 20 percent of the violent crime in New York City occurs in public housing.

[Former] Mayor Bloomberg also thinks that vertical patrols are beneficial to keeping public housing residents safe.

Bloomberg: The NYPD goes to these buildings for a very simple reason: it's where crimes are being committed and to give residents of these buildings some security that those in doorman buildings are afforded.

But many public housing residents are missing even the most basic security. In a 2010 survey, half of NYCHA respondents didn't have a working intercom or even a front door that locked, so

anybody can just walk in at any time. Maybe there wouldn't be a need for as many police officers if the doors locked.

Back on the Lower East Side, Dereese introduced me to Antonio Perez, one of the young people she tries to keep out of trouble. He was hanging out by the playground until she convinced him to come over and talk to us.

Perez: I've been here in Campos Plaza. I'm 23. I've been here for about 18 years of my life.

Fagbenle: So, do you see vertical patrols in your building?

Perez: Yes. Yes. I've been harassed standing in my own building. ID'd in my own building.

Dereese said that the police were different back in the day.

Huff: When my father died, two cops took me like I was their daughter, and they helped, you know, bring me up and raise me. You know, made sure I got my summer job. You don't have too many cops that do that for these kids in this time and days. And that's what some of these kids are missing. If I was to be a kid, the way these teenagers are growing up and not have any police involvement, I would hate them, the way some of these kids do. I really would.

Antonio admits that the young people are part of the problem, but he wants the police to take part of the blame for the tension at Campos.

Perez: To keep it real, you guys are keep talking about change. Ms. Dereese, I have a lot of respect for you. You want change, Mama?

Huff: Yes, I do.

Perez: Tell them change first.

But I don't see anything changing until there's more people who make that effort. Because for every person like Dereese, there's always going to be 10 other people who are waiting for the other side to take the first step.

For WNYC, I'm Rookie Reporter Tamitayo Fagbenle.