Racial Profiling Via Nextdoor.com

White Oakland residents are increasingly using the popular social networking site to report “suspicious activity” about their Black neighbors — and families of color fear the consequences could be fatal.

By Sam Levin

The strange glances are starting to become more frequent. James Fisher, a fourteen-year-old freshman at Oakland Charter High School, has noticed that as he gets older, more people on the street eye him with suspicious or fearful stares. “Some of them just look at me, and then they’ll look away,” he said. “Or sometimes, I go into stores, and they look at me like they think I’m going to do something bad.”

James is a mixed-race, dark-skinned Black teenager who is soft-spoken and looks about three years older than his actual age. On a recent afternoon last month, I chatted with him and Emma, his thirteen-year-old sister, at their house in the Upper Dimond neighborhood in the Oakland hills. The two siblings told me about their first weeks of high school and how they have enjoyed the freedom at times to walk around Oakland’s Chinatown district without their parents.

But they never walk around their own neighborhood alone. The tree-lined residential street of large single-family homes where the Fishers live more closely resembles suburbia than a densely populated city. Positioned at the top of a steep hill near Dimond Canyon Park, their house feels worlds away from the busy urban bustle of MacArthur Boulevard and the Fruitvale district just to the southwest. On the surface, their block looks like an ideal place to raise kids — safe, family-friendly, and quiet. Although their individual street is very diverse — with about ten Black or mixed-race kids now living nearby — white residents are by far the largest racial group in the surrounding area. And it’s in this neighborhood, perhaps more so than any other part of Oakland, that James feels most like a target for the uncomfortable glances that are becoming increasingly common in his life.

But he and his parents are not just worried about hurtful stares from neighbors or passersby. Over the last two years, their neighborhood has become overrun with racial profiling — but not by police, rather by mostly white residents incorrectly assuming that people of color who are walking, driving, hanging out, or living in the neighborhood are criminal suspects. These residents often don’t recognize that they may have long held racial prejudices or unconscious biases, but recently, they’ve been able to instantly broadcast their unsubstantiated suspicions to thousands of their neighbors with the click of a mouse.

Nextdoor.com, a website that bills itself as the “private social network for neighborhoods,” offers a free web platform on which members can blast a wide variety of messages to people who live in their immediate neighborhood. A San Francisco-based company founded in 2010, Nextdoor’s user-friendly site has exploded in popularity over the last two years in Oakland. As of this fall, a total of 176 Oakland neighborhoods have Nextdoor groups — and 20 percent of all households in the city use the site, according to the company.

On Nextdoor, people give away free furniture or fruit from their backyards. Users reunite lost dogs with their owners. Members organize community meetings and share tips about babysitters and plumbers. But under the “Crime and Safety” section of the site, the tone is much less neighborly. There, residents frequently post unsubstantiated “suspicious activity” warnings that result in calls to the police on Black citizens who have done nothing wrong. In recent months, people from across the city have shared with me Nextdoor posts labeling Black people as suspects simply for walking down the street, driving a car, or knocking on a door. Users have suggested that Black salesmen and mail carriers may be burglars. One Nextdoor member posted a photo of a young Black boy who failed to pick up dog poop and suggested that his neighbors call the police on him.

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White residents have also used Nextdoor to complain and organize calls to police about Black residents being too noisy in public parks and bars — raising concerns that the site amplifies the harmful impacts of gentrification. On Nextdoor and other online neighborhood groups — including Facebook pages and Yahoo and Google listservs — residents have called Black and Latino men suspicious for being near bus stops, standing in “shadows,” making U-turns, and hanging around outside coffee shops.

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“These posts cast such a wide net on our young Black men,” said Shikira Porter, an Upper Dimond resident, who is Black. “You start seeing this over and over again, and you understand quickly that, oh, it’s the Black body that they’re afraid of.”

In some Nextdoor groups, when people ask their neighbors to think twice before labeling someone suspicious, other users attack them for playing the “race card” and being the “political correctness police.” Some groups have even actively silenced and banned the few vocal voices of color speaking up on the websites, according to records that I reviewed.

This sometimes toxic virtual environment has real-world impacts. Residents encourage each other to call police, share tips on how to reach law enforcement, and sometimes even alert cops and security guards about suspicious activity they’ve only read secondhand from other commenters. I spoke to longtime Oaklanders who say the profiling is getting worse, noting that they have recently had neighbors question them on their block or in their own driveway — suspicious of whether they might be up to no good. People of color described stories of white residents running away from them, screaming at them to leave a shared garden space, and calling police on young children in their own home. In some areas, the profiling is further exacerbated by the growing presence of private patrol officers whom residents have hired to guard the streets.

Even high-ranking officials with OPD, which has a formal partnership with Nextdoor, have admitted that the department is sometimes forced to respond to baseless suspicions about residents of color — the kind of profiling that can go unchecked in online groups. “If ... they’re all feeding off of the same bias, then that could be harmful,” said OPD Assistant Chief Paul Figueroa. He later added, “Fear can really drive the application of bias.”

Now, a group of Oakland residents calling themselves Neighbors for Racial Justice is trying to fight back against the rampant profiling online and in their neighborhoods. But Nextdoor officials and the white residents who control and dominate the online groups do not appear to be taking their concerns seriously or willing to make substantive changes.

And as long as the profiling and prejudiced online posts persist, Mitsu Fisher, the father of James and Emma, is not letting his kids play outside or walk the streets of their own neighborhood without supervision. Mitsu made that an official policy in February 2014 after a patrol officer in the Oakmore neighborhood — who was working for a private security company and was not supposed to be armed — chased and shot a Black teenage boy suspected of committing a burglary, according to police. The fact that a private guard shot a young suspect was upsetting enough to Mitsu, but it was the response from his neighbors online that led him to truly fear for his own kids’ safety.

On Nextdoor and a neighborhood Yahoo group, residents celebrated the private security guard for shooting the teenager — and organized to buy him a thank-you gift.

When I first met Audrey Esquivel for coffee in the Laurel district, she handed me a grainy photocopy of a one-page document dated June 15, 1937. The report, from the government-sponsored Home Owners’ Loan Corporation, offered a formal description of the housing characteristics and desirability of the Fruitvale district in East Oakland. Based on information from a City of Oakland building inspector, the report stated that the neighborhood’s “favorable influences” included its convenience to local transportation, schools, and shopping centers. There was, however, one main “detrimental influence” that made the neighborhood undesirable: “proximity to area [infiltrated] by Negroes.” And the area would likely become increasingly less desirable over the next decade due to continued “infiltration,” the report added.

Esquivel, who is mixed-race Black and lives in the nearby Glenview neighborhood, recently stumbled upon the document while reading about “redlining” — the decades-long process by which the government and banks systematically enabled white neighborhoods to prosper with mortgage loans while denying housing opportunities to communities of color. Like cities across the country, Oakland became very segregated because of redlining with wealthier white communities thriving in the hills and poorer Black neighborhoods languishing in the flatlands.

“We can show how the history of the neighborhood is playing out over time,” said Esquivel, who is a member of the Neighbors for Racial Justice group. “We went from this time when segregation such as this was legal, and it was okay to be openly racist and little Johnny could call Black people the ‘n-word.’ Now, it’s ‘Don’t call them anything. We’re all just human. There’s never been any education on how to successfully transition to integration.”

Oakland is much more integrated today than it was in the 1930s, although the hills are still largely white. In the 94602 zip code — which includes Glenview, Upper Dimond, and Oakmore — whites make up 46 percent of the population, Blacks make up 18 percent, and Latinos comprise 14 percent. The East Oakland flatlands neighborhoods to the south are majority Latino or Black.

Although Oakland may have come a long way since the days of redlining, Esquivel said that subtle racial tensions and prejudices are pervasive in her neighborhood and that she often encounters white residents who are, to varying degrees, uncomfortable with the presence of people of color. When she moved from North Carolina to the East Bay, she thought she would be joining a progressive community — one in which she would not feel ostracized or unwelcome due to the color of her skin. But the fears that her white neighbors have when they see her are real and damaging, she said.

For people of color living in Oakland neighborhoods that are still predominantly white, many of the concerns regarding racial profiling stem from community and police efforts to fight crime. Even as overall crime continues to decline here, Oakland consistently ranks as one of the top ten cities for violent crime per capita. In terms of crime prevention efforts, much of the neighborhood-level organizing has focused on robberies, burglaries, and car break-ins — the criminal offenses that can plague certain areas in waves and shake people’s sense of security in their own neighborhoods or homes. As a snapshot, through mid-September, in OPD’s Area 3 — which includes Lakeshore, Eastlake, Dimond, Laurel, and Fruitvale — there had been 651
reported robberies, 1,388 burglaries (893 of which were car burglaries), and 348 aggravated assaults.

But OPD also responds to a considerable number of calls from citizens concerned about the people they see in their neighborhoods: Across the city during the past two years, according to data that the department provided to me, police have received an average of roughly 720 calls for suspicious people or vehicles every month.

Through Neighborhood Crime Prevention Council meetings and other local organizing groups, residents in the hills have pressured the city for years to devote more police officers to patrolling their streets and investigating property crimes and violent offenses in their neighborhoods. Motivated by the belief that OPD prioritizes resources in high-crime areas and does not do enough to protect their homes in the hills, residents have repeatedly taken matters into their own hands. Some have formed traditional neighborhood watch groups in which volunteers walk the streets. Others have installed security cameras. And many neighborhoods have launched private email listservs that enable residents to efficiently communicate with their neighbors. In the early days of the listservs, the idea was that residents could use the online communities to coordinate efforts to push for police officers — and also share tips about suspicious activity or crimes in real time.

One of the first in Oakland was a Dimond email listserv that launched roughly seventeen years ago, according to Ann Nomura, who is Mitsu Fisher’s wife and the mother of James and Emma. “It was very much a grassroots tool for organizing,” said Nomura. “It was really focused on getting basic services.”

But as more of these lists emerged and grew in membership — and as concerns about crime escalated — the tone shifted, according to Nomura, who has subscribed to numerous listservs over the years. Eventually, many groups frequently attracted inflammatory posts or racially insensitive messages about crime trends and suspicious people, she said. Nomura sent me one 2012 example from the Dimond group in which a white woman warned of a “light skinned black female” talking on her cell and walking her dog. “I don’t recognize her. Has anyone described any suspect of crime like her?” the neighbor wrote. Although some responded that the post seemed unnecessary, others thanked her for sharing the information and agreed that the woman seemed suspicious. Eventually, a neighbor chimed in to say that the woman lived a few streets away and has lived in the same house her whole life.

When lifelong Oakland resident Leland Thompson joined “Glennfriends” — a Yahoo group for the Glenview neighborhood that started in 2001 — he was shocked to see how many posts described suspicious people with vague descriptions that matched him: “Black man, five-ten, 160 pounds, bald,” he said. Thompson told me that he and his wife, who is white, now have a running list once his cell phone number was posted on the website. “That’s the only thing that’s changed,” he said.

The neighborhood, which is known for its peaceful and active lifestyle, has grown exponentially in Oakland and now includes nearly 43,000 total members spread out across 31,000 homes in the city, he said. When I met Bolton in early September, he told me that 2,000 Oakland users had joined in the previous thirty days. In order to join, users have to verify their addresses and use real names — so that when police officers send out messages, they know they are reaching city residents. Bolton said the department doesn’t have access to neighborhood posts and doesn’t monitor crime and safety messages unless users send them directly to OPD.

Since Nextdoor launched in 2010 with its first neighborhood group in Menlo Park, Oakland has been at the forefront of the site’s expansion. Headquartered in downtown San Francisco, the company expanded nationally in October 2011 and now boasts more than 75,000 groups with an average of 100 new neighborhoods joining every day. The site, co-founded by tech entrepreneur and CEO Nirav Tolia, has also partnered with more than 1,200 government entities, mostly police departments, throughout the United States. That includes more than 35 law enforcement agencies in the Bay Area. The Nextdoor Oakmore group was one of the first neighborhoods on the site, and OPD partnered with the company before it had even rolled out its platform for public agencies.

Today, the five largest Nextdoor neighborhoods in Oakland are Adams Point, Golden Gate, Maxwell Park, Crocker Highlands, and Oakmore, according to the company. Because Oakland has long had active Yahoo and other email groups, Nextdoor was an easy sell for many neighborhoods, said company spokesperson Kelsey Grady, in a recent interview. “Oakland has been a community that has been interested in organizing for a long time. The adoption has been so great there.”
In Oakland, roughly 20 percent of all Nextdoor conversations are about crime and safety. The rest cover events, lost and found, free items, classifieds, and recommendations. In my review of Nextdoor crime posts from neighborhoods in North Oakland, East Oakland, and around Lake Merritt, I found that the vast majority of comments about suspicious behavior involved Black suspects. In a given month in a single neighborhood, out of several dozen total crime and safety posts, a small number of posts — usually three to five — typically feature descriptions of suspicious behavior with questionable justifications. And in many more posts that cite reasonably suspicious behavior or actual alleged crimes, users described suspects with few specifics beyond “African American,” male or female, old or young.

“I get so nauseous and so angry,” said Porter, the Upper Dimond resident, who is also a member of Neighbors for Racial Justice. When I met her for coffee, she handed me a stack of Nextdoor Oakmore printouts with racially biased reports of suspicion.

One user told people to be alert after seeing an “African American driver” inside a white commercial van, wearing a “bright green vest,” parked on the street at 2 a.m. — nothing else suspicious. In a post this summer, a resident warned others to watch out for “two young African Americans, slim, baggy pants, early 20s” who said they were looking for a lost dog. Noting that they did not have “anything like bags to carry stuff out of a house they might break into,” the woman said the situation may be “benign,” but added, “I have a sense that it wasn’t.” In another post, a man warned of a “nefarious individual” — a Black youth who appeared to be sixteen years old — who came to his door saying he was looking for his friend. Another posted about a Latino man, describing him as a “suspicious character” who appeared “visibly nervous” and was “hiding near the bus stop.”

In another case, a user suggested that a Black salesman working for a security company and going door-to-door was clearly casing homes in search of a place to burglarize. Even after a resident confirmed with the company in question that he was an authorized salesperson and posted that on the message thread, people still chimed in saying he seemed shady and could be a potential threat.

These kinds of posts aren’t isolated to the hills. In a North Oakland neighborhood, one woman recently titled a post “Attempted Robbery” and described a “lighter skin colored African American about 6’3” who “kept in the shadows as he approached,” then seemed to hesitate near her and her husband and son. “That guy totally seemed like he was up to no good,” she wrote. There was, based on her description, no attempted robbery or even any verbal or physical contact whatsoever, but after receiving encouragement from fellow commenters, she called the police to report the man.

Near Lake Merritt, residents have increasingly used Nextdoor to organize coordinated noise complaints against music and parties in the park — in some cases, mostly white users of the site lament about the activities of people of color who have long hung out and held social events there. Earlier this year, OPD responded on Nextdoor, saying police would be increasing patrols around the lake in response to people’s complaints about noise and parties.

Some Black residents and activists say people of color who have lived for a long time near Lake Merritt are now subject to harassment. “These people aren’t thugs trying to rob you — these are people who actually live around here,” said Davey D Cook, a Black radio journalist and longtime Oakland resident. He credited Nextdoor for the increased police presence around the lake — including recently when a group of cops responded to calls from a white man about a small Sunday night drum circle exclusively made up of people of color.

“When we see new people coming in and using these apps, it’s very discouraging,” said Theo Williams, a Black Oakland native and one of the musicians who had to face police questions over his drum circle. “It’s like now you have a new acronym — ‘partying while Black’! ... It’s disturbing and sad.”

In Adams Point last March, multiple users publicly complained about a Black boy who was apparently not picking up his dog’s poop. After one woman described him as a “very nice African American young boy who regularly walks a rather scary looking pit-mix,” and asked for suggestions on how to get him to pick up the dog’s waste, one commenter suggested she call police. That commenter wrote: “Not picking up poop from your dog is against the law — it’s a health violation.” This commenter also suggested she contact the boy’s school. Another man chimed in with an image of the boy: “Here’s his photo. OPD might find this handy.”

Later, the commenter who posted the photo suggested that the city aggressively target his family with fines, writing: “I’m sure they don’t have that kind of money... but they could at least put a lean [sic] on their home and vehicles.”

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I’ve also read posts in which Nextdoor users argue that commenters who raise concerns about racial profiling are engaging in victim-blaming — that residents who have faced traumatic crimes in their own neighborhoods or homes are understandably frightened for their safety and have a right to post their suspicions without being called a racist. They sometimes further argue that a majority of the suspects committing the crimes affecting their communities are Black, and that, as a result, it’s logical to be suspicious of people of color they don’t recognize.

Except for the comments made by a few blatantly racist trolls, the majority of biased posts in these groups appear to stem from a place of genuine fear and concern. But activists argue that residents should proactively work to check their biases and recognize that, statistically, only a tiny fraction of Oakland’s Black population is engaged in criminal activity.

Debby Weintraub, a white Rockridge resident, has twice had burglars break into her home — including a recent incident in which suspects took more than $10,000 worth of her family’s belongings, including many sentimental items. As a victim of these crimes, she said she understands the pain and fear that people in her neighborhood feel, but she also noted that she is still disturbed that people freely publish their suspicions even when there’s no evidence of wrongdoing. She said she tries to recognize that her own suspicions are simply not worth broadcasting. “I certainly don’t want to go around suggesting that somebody who might’ve made me feel uncomfortable for whatever reason is necessarily a suspect,” she said. “I don’t want to live my life like that.”

Esquivel, a Glenview resident, said there is no acceptable defense for suspicious activity posts that turn all people of color into crime suspects in their own neighborhoods. “When lives are on the line and personal safety is on the line, it ceases to be okay to air these kinds of beliefs,” she said. “And this is ineffective crime reporting. You need to target the suspicious behavior. Skin color is not a crime, and skin color is not a suspicious behavior.”

The issue became much more urgent for her after she was profiled in her own neighborhood in 2013. Esquivel had asked her neighbors on Glenfriends, the Yahoo group, if anyone had lemons to spare. A white woman responded and said she could come over anytime and grab some from her tree — even if she wasn’t home. When Esquivel stopped by one morning a few days later, she plucked some lemons and then rang the front doorbell to see if the woman was home so she could say thank you.

The woman looked out the window and refused to open the door. Esquivel recalled seeing the woman tell someone on the phone, “No way I’m opening the door.” The woman, it turned out, thought Esquivel was trying to break into her home. “I was absolutely visibly shaken,” Esquivel said. “I just started crying.” She said she was so upset she couldn’t even drive anymore; her partner, who is white and had waited in the car, had to take the wheel.

After that incident, Esquivel felt that she had to do something to speak out about the profiling in her own neighborhood. She subsequently joined Neighbors for Racial Justice, a small group of both white residents and people of color who came together in 2013 to speak out against prejudiced posts on Nextdoor and on Yahoo and Google listservs (many of which remain active). The group, which now has roughly twenty members, has given presentations on racial profiling at community meetings, hosted film screenings on racial inequities, led Black Lives Matter vigils, and has brought its concerns to OPD, Neighborhood Crime Prevention Council meetings, and Nextdoor.

The group has also written guidelines about how to report suspicious activity online, including encouraging users to focus on behaviors — meaning specific actions that suggest criminal activity — and emphasizing distinct characteristics, such as shoes, facial hair, tattoos, and car model. Race must be secondary to all that, and if you can’t describe behaviors and other specific descriptors, then don’t post. Otherwise, “We see African-American men in every single post not doing anything suspicious,” said Porter.

Porter provided me with a handful of the rare Nextdoor Oakmore posts that feature suspicious people who are white. In clear contrast to the posts about Black men — described as “thugs” and “thieves” with baggy clothes or hoodies — users described white suspects in more sympathetic terms. One, for example, described a “clean cut, college age-ish white guy” who had a suspicious door-to-door sales pitch. Another described a “Hippy White guy” who was literally standing in someone’s backyard. A third posted a photo of two suspicious white men with a lengthy disclaimer, stating that if someone could identify them as neighbors, she would “apologize to them personally for thinking they were up to something.”

Black neighbors never receive this kind of benefit of the doubt, Porter said, and even when residents subsequently prove the innocence of a profiled person, there rarely are apologies or even public acknowledgements that the suspicion was false. On the contrary, Neighbors for Racial Justice has faced a significant uphill battle in its efforts to push moderators of the online groups to actively discourage racial profiling and adopt explicit, enforced policies against discriminatory posts.

On Glenfriends, Esquivel has asked her neighbors on multiple occasions to consider how people of color might feel about their questionable posts. In response, she has faced harassing, aggressive, and bullying comments. For example, she once wrote a post that said in part: “Do you realize when you send fear-based emails that put folks on HIGH ALERT for a person of color, without describing truly suspicious behavior, vehicle description, or anything beyond skin color, you are targeting ME?”

One neighbor responded: “Where the hell do you get off, Esquivel? Is your presumptuous, condescending, ignorant profiling of White neighbors the full measure of your mastery of racial sensitivity? [A neighbor] reported suspicious activity of yet another crew of black thugs in very temperate, neutral language that was verified by [a different neighbor’s] video cameras.”

Esquivel subsequently asked for that commenter to be removed, and although some supported her, many defended the commenter, saying he had free speech rights to voice his opinion and that his language did not constitute abuse. Eventually, the moderator of the group, who is a white man, banned Esquivel from posting on Glenfriends.

“I’m one of the few voices of color that dares to speak on this listserv and now I’m censored!” she said in an interview. “So, you’re not hearing from any Brown or Black people.”

On Nextdoor, moderators are called “leads,” and they are often one of the founding or early members of a neighborhood group. They manage their neighborhood’s Nextdoor Crime and Safety Resources section and can remove inappropriate messages and close comment threads. In the Oakmore group, Neighbors for Racial Justice has had significant conflicts with longtime lead Hugh Bartlett, who is white and has shut down discussions about race issues and Black Lives Matter on multiple occasions, arguing that they are not relevant to Nextdoor. For example, Nomura posted an Express article about racial profiling on BART — and Bartlett closed the discussion to comments saying it was not appropriate for a group focused on neighborhood issues. However, he has permitted discussions on coal exports in Oakland, pesticide use in the Bay Area, and Oakland teacher contracts.

From his posts on Nextdoor and his comments during a phone interview, it’s clear that Bartlett views the discussion about profiling as something of an annoyance that unnecessarily clogs up the site’s newsfeed. In shutting down the post on BART profiling, he wrote that he couldn’t permit everyone to post about their “favorite axe to grind.” And once in response to a post about a “super shady-looking dude,” Bartlett responded: “Not to start a
race war, but what skin color was he?" After immediately deleting one of Porter's posts on racial profiling, he wrote a message to her that said: "If these posts continue, you will be reported to Nextdoor.

He told me by phone: “There is definitely, in our neighborhood, a specific group that is pretty aggressive at being the political correctness police.” He acknowledged that “our neighbors tend to be more suspicious of African-American people," but said that given the frequent complaints about profiling from Neighbors for Racial Justice, “the consciousness in our neighborhood is pretty high.”

When I asked Bartlett — who is also the lead organizer for his local private patrol group — how he felt about the concerns from families of color who fear that Nextdoor profiling and the presence of guards is a toxic mix, he responded, “I think it’s paranoia.”

In the early days of Nextdoor, the company did not envision that the site would be used for public safety and crime prevention, said Grady, the company spokesperson. “We’ve really seen Nextdoor evolve into the virtual neighborhood watch,” she said, noting that she often hears about new members joining specifically because they are concerned about safety and want to share and receive information about criminal activity. From the start, the philosophy of Nextdoor was that residents would drive the creation and growth of their neighborhood sites — with residents founding their local groups, inviting other neighbors to join, writing about the topics that most interest them, and self-moderating controversial posts and discussions. “What people love about Nextdoor is it’s a very democratic platform,” Grady said.

When it launched, Nextdoor published “guidelines” stating that users should refrain from publishing profanity or discriminatory posts. And in April of this year — in response to growing concerns about racially prejudiced comments — the company added a specific guideline that users should not post anything that could be perceived as “profiling.” Buried in an FAQ section, the company defines profiling as the “act of making assumptions about a person’s character or intentions based on their appearance or identity rather than their actions.” The Nextdoor “leads” are in charge of interpreting and enforcing the guidelines, and users can contact the company if they are unhappy with a lead’s actions — or inaction.

For more than a month, Neighbors for Racial Justice has complained to the company about Bartlett, the Oakmore lead. At one point in August, a Nextdoor representative agreed that Bartlett’s deletion of posts about racial justice was inappropriate, writing in a direct email to one of the members: “We deeply appreciate you [bringing] this to our attention as we take issues of lead abuse very seriously.” That Nextdoor official went so far as to remove Bartlett as a lead. But emails show that, later that same day, the company backtracked and restored his status with little explanation.

“He just allows these [racial profiling] posts to fly, and anytime we challenge that or any neighbors say ‘I feel endangered by this,’ he shuts it down,” Porter said of Bartlett. She was particularly frustrated when a Nextdoor representative responded to her complaints with a message criticizing her posts in the group, writing, “I’d definitely encourage you to use a bit more tact while communicating your points to neighbors.”

Last week, after much back and forth, Nextdoor agreed to make Mitsu Fisher a “co-lead” of the Oakmore group alongside Bartlett, according to Fisher.

Grady said the company takes concerns about racial profiling seriously and that Nextdoor is considering possibly requiring new members to sign an agreement saying they will abide by its guidelines. But she also said she believes that members tend to speak up about racial profiling when it occurs. “We’re starting to facilitate a lot of really healthy conversations on racial profiling,” she said. She further said that the company rarely receives complaints about profiling from users, noting that 0.25 percent of all posts are flagged as abusive (which could be for a wide variety of reasons, including profiling).

But the advocates with Neighbors for Racial Justice, along with experts on racial profiling, said Nextdoor can and should do much more. On a basic level, the company could post clear and strongly worded warnings directly in the Crime and Safety section stating that it will not tolerate any profiling. The company could also take a more active role in deleting offensive posts or banning users who continue to engage in profiling after they’ve been warned. Activists further suggested that the company require neighborhood leads to participate in basic training on profiling and how to moderate comments.

OPD — which Nextdoor says has been one of its most successful municipal partners — has also emphasized that it does not want to get calls about suspicious people who aren’t actually doing anything suspicious. Bolton, the lieutenant who spearheaded the Nextdoor partnership, noted that he has heard officers responding to calls for service ask, “Why, exactly, am I going to this call? You haven’t given me anything. ... What do you want me to do with this?”

Internally, OPD has long been plagued by racial biases within its department with data consistently showing that police stop and search people of color at disproportionately high rates; Black residents made up 57 percent of 2014 police stops, even though they constitute only 27 percent of the city’s population. OPD, which is under federal oversight due to its history of racially biased policing, has been working to combat its biases through ongoing training and research efforts. But experts note that police departments are more limited in their ability to eliminate profiling when it comes to citizens’ calls. In other words, when residents engage in racial profiling, police generally have to investigate, which creates yet another pathway for people of color to face unjustified contacts with police — beyond the racially biased stops and searches cops are already doing on their own.

“If they are just looking around furtively or they look out of place, that’s not a valid basis of suspicion,” said Jack Glaser, UC Berkeley public policy professor and expert on racial profiling. “If you call the police on them, it puts the police in this bind. It forces the police to deprive them of their constitutional rights.”

Figueroa, OPD assistant chief, said the department is working to eliminate racially biased policing at all levels, not just in stops and searches. That includes ensuring that a citizen’s questionable report of suspicious activity does not lead to an unwarranted and biased police response. But he acknowledged that when people opt to call police on anyone they deem suspicious, it can put a person of color on a path into the criminal justice system, which is plagued by many biases.
After citizens call police, for example, dispatchers who have to translate that information and pass it along to officers may be influenced by their own unconscious biases, Figueroa explained. Then, the officers “apply their own judgments as to what they’re hearing, how to react, and how they’re going to approach the call,” he said. Even if a subsequent stop is, at that point, legally based on “probable cause,” the officers’ biases can influence what steps they take during the stop, he said. “There are so many layers involved in this. ... I am focused on trying to determine where implicit bias enters the process, then how can we control for that at each step.”

But as long as profiling by neighbors and police continues, the damage remains severe — for all residents. Glaser noted that when police spend time profiling innocent people, they are diverting resources away from those who are actually engaged in criminal activity. Profiling also breeds deep mistrust in law enforcement, which in turn makes it much harder for police to work with communities of color and investigate and solve crimes.

For those who are profiled, the psychological and emotional suffering can have lasting effects. It can make people afraid to leave their own house and walk to the grocery store at night or make them cautious about spending time in certain public places. And the harsh reality for some is that they aren’t even safe from profiling in their own homes.

Shikira Porter said a white man recently stared her down while she was in the driveway of her Upper Dimond house one morning, getting ready to take her son to school. “Finally, I said to him, ‘Yeah, I live here,’” she said. And two white women, she added, recently questioned her when she pulled over and briefly parked her car a few blocks from her home to answer a call on her cell from her son’s school. When these incidents happen, it can feel difficult to resume normal activities. “You’re supposed to go into your day and show up to work and not be angry,” she said. “It’s all these ways people of color have to try to hold it together.”

Leland Thompson, the Glenview resident, told me that white women have darted across the street to avoid him on his own block. He said that when that happened recently, he became so angry and frustrated that he was visibly shaking by the time he got home.

Vanessa Graham, who is Black and has lived in Rockridge for two decades, told me that about eight years ago, someone called OPD on her sons while they were home alone in their backyard after school one afternoon. The boys, then in sixth and eighth grades, came face-to-face with an OPD officer who showed up to their yard and demanded that the boys prove that they belonged there, she said. “‘How do I know you really live here?’” the cop told her sons, she recalled. When the family’s Labrador retriever started aggressively barking at the officer, he said something to the effect of, “‘If you don’t get that animal under control, I will shoot it,’” she said.

Graham still thinks about the incident to this day — especially when she sees people raising suspicions about young Black boys in her Nextdoor group. She wonders what would’ve happened if the officer had fired at their dog. The question that really haunts her is, “What if he had missed?”

For Ann Nomura and Mitsu Fisher, it’s not worth the risk to have their kids out in their neighborhood alone. “This looks like a good neighborhood until you get on the internet and see some of this craziness,” Mitsu said. Ann added: “I have no assurance that police would not grab my kid for no good reason.”

When I asked their kids James and Emma if they were frustrated with their parents’ policy demanding they stay indoors in the Upper Dimond, they expressed ambivalence. “It’s just not a very comfortable experience to live in a place where your neighbors might call the cops on you,” Emma said.