

Michael Bloomberg is under fire for resurfaced comments in which the Democratic presidential candidate says the way to bring down murder rates is to "put a lot of cops" in minority neighborhoods because that's where "all the crime is."

The billionaire and former New York City mayor made the comments at a 2015 appearance at the Aspen Institute, as part of an overall defense of his support for the controversial "stop and frisk" policing tactic that has been found to disproportionately affect minorities.

Bloomberg launched his presidential bid late last year with an apology for his support for the policy. He's taking an unconventional approach to the campaign, bypassing the traditional early states and gaining attention by flooding the airwaves with hundreds of millions of dollars in ads. He's spent recent days courting black voters whose support will be crucial to winning the Democratic nomination and will begin a campaign swing through the South on Wednesday. Seeking to blunt any political fallout from the comments, Bloomberg said Tuesday the remarks "do not reflect my commitment to criminal justice reform and racial equity."

But the audio of his Aspen speech highlights his embrace of the policy just a few years ago and suggests he was aware of the disproportionate impact of stop and frisk on minorities.

Bloomberg says that "95%" of murders and murder victims are young male minorities and that "you can just take the description, Xerox it and pass it out to all the cops." To combat crime, he says, "put a lot of cops where the crime is, which means in minority neighborhoods."

In the audio, he acknowledges that focusing police forces in minority neighborhoods means minorities are disproportionately arrested for marijuana possession but dismisses that as a necessary consequence. "Why do we do it? Because that's where all the crime is," Bloomberg said.

And to "get the guns out of the kids' hands," Bloomberg says, police must "throw 'em against the wall and frisk 'em."

"And they say, 'Oh, I don't want that. I don't wanna get caught.' So they don't bring the gun," he says.

According to a report in the Aspen Times that year, Bloomberg blocked the release of video of the Aspen Institute appearance. But the Aspen Times reporter uploaded what appears to be the full audio online, and it drew renewed attention Monday after podcaster Benjamin Dixon circulated it on Twitter.

In his Tuesday statement, Bloomberg notes that he "inherited the practice of stop and frisk" from Rudy Giuliani's administration and noted that by the time he left office at the end of 2013, he had significantly reduced its use. He said, "I should have done it faster and sooner."

But stop and frisk expanded dramatically on Bloomberg's watch, reaching a peak in 2011 when over 685,000 people were stopped, according to data from the American Civil Liberties Union. While its use declined significantly after that, Bloomberg stood by the program even in the face of widespread criticism and legal challenges.

Bloomberg has since distanced himself from the policy since launching his presidential campaign as part of a broader strategy aimed at appealing to minority voters. He's also acknowledged his own white privilege and released policies focused on issues central to some African American communities, like black homeownership and maternal mortality rates.

But the comments gave Bloomberg's political rivals an opportunity to pounce. Activist Tom Steyer, who is working aggressively to attract black voters in South Carolina ahead of that state's Feb. 29 primary, called the comments "extremely disturbing."

"The racist stereotypes he uses have no place today, and anyone running for the presidential nomination should disavow them," Steyer said.

Former Vice President Joe Biden is also staking his campaign on a strong showing in South Carolina. His top adviser, Symone Sanders, called the comments "sad and despicable," and said he "will have to answer for these comments."

And President Donald Trump, who himself has supported stop-and-frisk policies, sent out a tweet with a clip of the audio, declaring, "Bloomberg's a racist."

Trump later deleted the tweet, but in impromptu remarks to reporters in the Oval Office later Tuesday, he dismissed Bloomberg's apology for supporting stop and frisk as "disingenuous." But Trump himself has long defended the tactic.

In an October 2018 speech to the International Association of Police Chiefs, Trump touted its use in New York under then-Mayor Giuliani, now his personal attorney, and urged Chicago to adopt it.

And in 2013, he defended both the tactic and Bloomberg's police commissioner, tweeting, "Stop and frisk works. Instead of criticizing @NY\_POLICE Chief Ray Kelly, New Yorkers should be thanking him for keeping NY safe."

The attacks on Bloomberg reflect a growing concern about the billionaire's candidacy. Indeed, Bloomberg focused the bulk of his statement on Trump, arguing that the president's attack "reflects his fear over the growing strength of my campaign."

The president and his campaign team have been warily watching Bloomberg's spending spree since the former mayor's entry into the race.

Trump's campaign manager, Brad Parscale, had previously told staffers he would not worry about Bloomberg until he cracked double digits, which the former mayor has now done in some recent national polls. Parscale told aides recently that the campaign would soon be doing more Bloomberg-centric polling, according to a campaign aide not authorized to speak publicly about private conversations.

Trump has delivered frequent broadsides against Bloomberg, ignoring counsel from some aides, including senior adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner, to avoid elevating him in a Democratic field that remains unsettled.

Annoyed by Bloomberg's superior wealth, favorable press and easy entrée into the upper realm of the New York elite that long ago rejected him, Trump has repeatedly attacked the former mayor, including recent digs about his height and golf game. And on Tuesday, he hinted at how much Bloomberg's wealth remains on his mind when he said in the Oval Office that the former mayor is a "lightweight" and insisted he'd rather run against Bernie Sanders in the general election because the Vermont senator "has real followers."

Bloomberg, Trump said, is just "buying his way in."

The Trump campaign also believes that uncertainty in the Democratic field could help chip away at the other party's advantage with black voters. The campaign has made its own pitch, touting economic growth for minorities since 2016 and highlighting the president's advocacy for criminal justice reform, including in a highly watched Super Bowl ad.

Though Trump fares unfavorably with African Americans in most polls, the campaign is simultaneously aiming to win over more black voters and to discourage African Americans from turning out for Democrats by convincing them there is little difference between the two parties' agendas.

Black voters turned out overwhelmingly for Hillary Clinton in 2016 but at a lesser rate than for Barack Obama, contributing to Trump's slim margin of victory in several battleground

states.--Net