January 20, 2022

BY EMAIL
Public Safety Chair Kamillah Hanks
250 Broadway, Suite 1868
New York, NY 10007

CC:
Public Safety Committee members

RE: Advocates urge the City Council Speaker and Committee on Public Safety to hold the NYPD’s Strategic Response Group accountable for its abuse of protesters by holding an oversight hearing and disbanding the unit.

Dear Speaker and Committee Chair,

We, the undersigned organizations - a coalition of policing reform, civil rights, racial justice advocates and defenders – are writing to urge the New York City Council Committee on Public Safety to Disband the NYPD’s Strategic Response Group (SRG), a notoriously violent rapid response unit responsible for inflicting violence on New Yorkers. To begin the process, we urge the Committee to hold an oversight hearing on the SRG and its conduct at protests.

The NYPD has a checkered history of protest policing. In 2015, the NYPD’s aggressive policing of protest took on its newest form: the SRG. Time and time again, when SRG arrives on the scene, officers escalate situations and injure New Yorkers who are exercising their First Amendment rights.

While the unit’s abuse of protesters came into public view during the 2020 protests, its pattern of violence and bias emerged from the very moment it was created in 2015. The SRG was formed in the wake of the Ferguson uprising. At the time, Commissioner Bratton said: “It is designed for dealing with events like our recent protests, or incidents like Mumbai or what just happened in Paris.” Since its inception, the unit’s mission conflated terrorism with protest.

After pushback from advocates, who cited concerns around the criminalization of protest and the militarization of police, the NYPD amended the SRG’s mission. The NYPD’s Chief of Department announced that the unit would “not be involved in handling protests and demonstrations.”

The NYPD broke that promise just months later when the SRG made arrests at protests for Freddie Gray. By 2016, the unit’s budget had ballooned from $13 million to $90 million. The number of officers in the unit doubled to an estimated 700. The NYPD offers very little transparency on the funding, staffing, and deployment of SRG in our communities.

During the 2020 protests, the SRG’s brutalization of demonstrators came into full view. On June 4, 2020, the SRG descended on demonstrators in Mott Haven before the 8pm curfew. With demonstrators unable to escape, SRG officers brutally beat, zip-tied, and arrested 263 protesters, medics, and legal observers. Sixty-one people were injured. Human Rights Watch called this conduct "Intentional, planned, and unjustified.” The SRG’s suppression of protests neither began nor ended in the summer of 2020; they continue to use force against New Yorkers exercising their First Amendment rights to this day.
The NYPD is facing numerous lawsuits related to the department’s brutalization of protesters during last year’s Black Lives Matter protests, and it is no surprise that the SRG is at the heart of many of these lawsuits. In one complaint, an attorney calls SRG “inadequately trained, poorly supervised and disciplined group of NYPD members.” At a time when city resources must be dedicated to overcoming the pandemic, the SRG is putting a strain on City funds through their entanglements in litigation.

The SRG’s pattern of violence is not a coincidence; it is baked into its structure. The SRG is trained to suppress protesters, especially those demanding racial justice. The SRG’s bike squad manual identifies two types of protestor crowds: “peaceful” and “violent.” Examples of violent crowds include the “BLM movement, Occupy Wall Street, and Anti-Trump Demonstrators.” These trainings include guidelines for the deployment of sound cannons and tactical formations to trap and mass arrest protestors. There is no focus on First Amendment protections or de-escalation strategies, and a clear bias against those calling for racial justice.

SRG officers are disproportionately named in NYPD misconduct complaints. The NYCLU’s database of CCRB complaints shows that SRG officers receive an abnormally high number of misconduct complaints compared to non-SRG officers. There have been 455 complaints filed against SRG officers between 2015 and 2021. Of officers who were named in at least one complaint while in SRG, the median number of complaints since 2000 is six. The median number of complaints received since 2000 for all officers in the database is three.

The SRG also has a pattern of targeting people of color. Of those complaints that included a victim’s race, the impacted individual was a person of color 91 percent of the time. Sixty-six percent of victims were Black, 21 percent were Latinx, and nine percent were white.

New Yorkers have witnessed and been impacted by police protest suppression for far too long. The SRG’s brutality, bias, and lack of transparency makes the SRG a threat to the safety and First Amendment rights of New Yorkers. The Committee on Public Safety can combat that threat by disbanding the unit, starting by holding an oversight hearing on the SRG and its conduct.

The SRG is the most recent and most extreme manifestation of the NYPD’s aggressive approach, but the shortcomings of our current system of protest policing run much deeper. The SRG is emblematic of the NYPD’s tendency to use its bloated budget to inflict violence with impunity. To ensure that the unit and its tactics are not recreated under another name, the SRG’s funds should be removed from the hands of the NYPD. Police forces who look and act like an invading army do not belong in our communities or in our streets. Instead of investing tens of millions in the SRG, we should plunge resources into community programs and care services that keep New Yorkers safe.

Signed,

Association of Legal Aid Attorneys - Local 2325
Alliance of Families for Justice
Arab American Association of New York
Black Women’s March
Brooklyn Defender Services
Center for Community Alternatives
Citizen Action of New York
Color of Change
Communities United for Police Reform
Community Voices Heard
CUNY Law School Defenders Clinic
Drug Policy Alliance
DRUM: Desis Rising Up and Moving
Envision Freedom Fund
Equality for Flatbush
GAPIMNY: Gay Asian & Pacific Islander Men of New York
Girls for Gender Equity
Immigrant Defense Project
Justice Committee
Justice for Families
Katal Center for Equity, Health, and Justice
Latino Justice PRLDEF
Legal Action Center
Legal Aid Society
Make the Road NY
Malcolm X Grassroots Movement
New York Appleseed
NYC-DSA
New York Civil Liberties Union
New York County Defender Services
New York Immigration Coalition
NYC-DSA Tech Action Working Group
New York State Youth Leadership Council
Police Reform Organizing Project
Policing and Social Justice Project at CUNY
Public Science Project
Red Hook Initiative
S.T.O.P: The Surveillance Technology Oversight Project
Theatre of the Oppressed NYC
The Center for Constitutional Rights
The Gathering for Justice
VOCAL - NY
Youth Over Guns
Youth Represent