

Open Letter From New York City Elected Officials in Support of Disbanding the NYPD's Strategic Response Group

We, the undersigned elected officials, are writing in support of the campaign to disband the NYPD's Strategic Response Group (SRG). The SRG is a notoriously violent rapid response unit responsible for inflicting violence on New Yorkers. To protect the safety and First Amendment rights of New Yorkers, the NYPD must be held accountable for the SRG's abuse, and the unit must be disbanded.

The SRG was formed in 2015 in the wake of the Ferguson uprising with a dual purpose: protest policing and counterterrorism. This conflation of terrorism with protest has led to predictable results. Time and time again, when SRG arrives on the scene, officers escalate situations and injure New Yorkers who are exercising their First Amendment rights.

After pushback from advocates, who cited concerns around the criminalization of protest and the militarization of police, the NYPD promised in 2015 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 violence did not end in 2020 and is not limited to protests. On June 5, 2021, the SRG was deployed to enforce the 10PM curfew in Washington Square Park. At 10:01, dozens of SRG officers clad in riot gear descended on the park, where they [tased](#), [beat](#), and kettled park-goers, people experiencing homelessness, and at least one photographer. Twenty-two people were arrested, including a pair of park-goers who were on a date. After clearing the park, SRG officers chased community members [several blocks down the street](#).

The SRG was also central to homeless encampment sweeps throughout 2022, when SRG officers were deployed to violently clear encampments and even arrest unhoused residents. In April of 2022, while the suspect in the subway shooting was at large, dozens of SRG officers were clearing an encampment [mere blocks](#) from where the shooter was apprehended. More recently, the SRG made 7 arrests of clinic defenders outside of the Bleecker Street Planned Parenthood, where the unit is regularly deployed to escort anti-abortion activists from the nearby church to the clinic.

The NYPD is facing numerous lawsuits related to the department's brutalization of protesters during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, and it is no surprise that the SRG is at the heart of many of these lawsuits. Data provided by the CCRB and analyzed by the NYCLU shows that SRG officers are also named in NYPD misconduct complaints at rates far higher than the NYPD officers overall and that the victims of SRG misconduct are overwhelmingly Black and Latinx.

The SRG's pattern of violence 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.

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. We must combat that threat by disbanding the unit, reinvesting its bloated budget into resources and care for communities, and ensuring that the unit and its harmful tactics are not recreated under another name. Militarized police forces do not belong at protests, or in our communities.

Signed,

Council Member Christopher Marte
Council Member Crystal Hudson
Council Member Alexa Aviles
Council Member Carmen De La Rosa
Council Member Chi Ossé
Council Member Kristin Richardson Jordan
Council Member Shaun Abreu
Council Member Tiffany Cabán
Council Member Shekar Krishnan
Council Member Sandy Nurse
Council Member Jennifer Gutierrez
Council Member Shahana Hanif
Council Member Lincoln Restler
Council Member Charles Barron
Council Member Pierina Sanchez
Council Member Julie Won
Council Member Althea Stevens
Council Member Carlina Rivera
Council Member Kevin C. Riley
Council Member Gale Brewer
Council Member Rita Joseph
Council Member Amanda Farías
Council Member Farah Louis
Council Member Erik Bottcher