

# WHY WE MUST DISBAND THE NYPD'S STRATEGIC RESPONSE GROUP

## CRACKING DOWN ON DISSENT

Police have a long history of suppressing dissent and the NYPD has its own checkered past of protest policing. In 2015, the NYPD's aggressive policing of protest took on its newest form: the Strategic Response Group (SRG). The SRG is a notoriously violent rapid response unit. Despite promises from the department that the unit would not be deployed at protests, the SRG has consistently threatened, attacked, and arrested protesters. Time and time again, when SRG arrives on the scene, officers escalate situations and injure New Yorkers who are exercising their First Amendment rights.

## THE PROBLEMS

### Biased Training

The SRG is trained to suppress protesters, especially those demanding racial justice. The SRG's bike squad manual identifies two types of protester crowds: "peaceful" and "violent." Examples of violent crowds include "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.

### Bloated Budget

Within a year of the SRG's founding, the unit's budget ballooned from \$13 million to over \$133 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.

Despite the Department's initial claims that the SRG would engage in counterterrorism work, the NYPD's public description of the unit does not include counterterrorism. Instead, other units, like the Critical Response Command, perform counter terror work. In fact, nearly every policing activity the SRG performs is already carried out by other NYPD agencies. The only unique role the SRG seems to fill is its heavy specialization in the suppression of protest.

## Violence

The NYPD is facing numerous lawsuits related to the department's brutalization of protesters during last year's Black Lives Matter protests. The SRG is at the heart of many of these lawsuits. In one complaint, an attorney references the unit as an "inadequately trained, poorly supervised and disciplined group of NYPD members."

In June 2020, the SRG trapped, beat, zip-tied, and arrested 263 protesters, medics, and legal observers at a protest in Mott Haven. In September, Human Rights Watch published a report on the protest, declaring the NYPD's conduct "intentional, planned, and unjustified." Sixty-one people were injured.

The SRG's pattern of attacking protesters is not a recent phenomenon. In 2018, SRG officer Numuel Amador choked two protesters at an anti-ICE rally in Manhattan.

## Right Before Our Eyes

Between May 2020 and January 2021, NYCLU protest monitors witnessed 39 instances of police arresting non-violent protesters. Every time protesters were arrested, the SRG was present.

NYCLU protest monitors have documented 25 instances of use of force against protesters, including pepper spray, baton beatings, and use of bicycles as weapons. Monitors have also witnessed 23 instances of kettling, a violent and controversial tactic used to trap protesters. The SRG was present and participating at all but one of these incidents.

## Racial Bias

The SRG has a pattern of targeting people of color. The NYCLU's database of complaints filed with the City's Civilian Complaint Review Board show there have been 455 complaints filed against SRG officers between 2015 and 2021. 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.

## Misconduct

There is a long history of misconduct amongst SRG officers.

The NYCLU's database of CCRB complaints shows that SRG officers receive an abnormally high number of misconduct complaints compared to non-SRG officers. 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 SOLUTION

The SRG is emblematic of the NYPD's tendency to use its bloated budget to inflict violence with impunity. Combatting the SRG's brutality means putting an end to the SRG itself. The unit should be disbanded. Moreover, to ensure that the SRG and its tactics are not recreated under another name, the practice of policing protests with violence and brutality must end.

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. 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.

## TAKE ACTION



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