

Council on American-Islamic Relations, New York (CAIR-NY) Testimony to New York City Council's Public Safety Committee:

Disband the NYPD's Strategic Response Group

My name is Lamyā Agarwala, and I am an attorney with the New York Chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, known as CAIR-NY. CAIR is a leading Muslim civil rights organization that works on a range of legal advocacy and education related to discrimination targeting Muslim Americans. I urge the City Council to hold NYPD's Strategic Response Group accountable for its abuse, disband the unit, and invest in community programs that actually keep us safe.

NYPD's SRG is designed to meet protesters with force. The unit's training overwhelmingly focuses on use of force, and members of the unit are trained to treat racial justice protesters as enemy combatants. In the SRG Bike Squad's manual, protest groups are divided into two categories: "peaceful" and violent." Examples of "violent" protesters are "BLM movement, Occupy Wall Street, and Anti-Trump Demonstrators." As a result, SRG officers receive disproportionately high levels of misconduct complaints, and have a history of racial bias. In misconduct complaints against SRG officers that included race between 2015-2020, 91% of complainants were people of color.

The last few months are a prime example of the SRG's mandate: protesters calling for a ceasefire and peace in Palestine have been labeled terrorists and brutalized by the NYPD because they are holding our government accountable for its role in ongoing war crimes. Below we highlight just a few examples of its violence against protestors from the last 5 months alone:

- In October, video footage showcases SRG punching people and shoving trapped protesters to the ground.¹
- In November, it was reported that the SRG handcuffed, knocked unconscious, and carried off a protester to a barricaded space and was not provided medical attention for over 30 minutes.²
- On Christmas Day, the NYPD was filmed beating people until they bled, separating fathers from their children, pepper spraying, and putting women wearing hijabs into headlocks.³
- In January, organizers were preparing to pray when the police attacked, violently throwing a minor to the ground and arresting him for sitting on a mailbox.⁴

¹ See New York Civil Liberties Union, *Report*, (October 22, 2023) available at <https://x.com/NYCLU/status/1716179959302021417?s=20>

² See Within Our Lifetime, *The Crackdown on Palestine*, (February 17, 2024) available at <https://wolpalestine.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/The-Crackdown-on-Palestine-Feb17-2.pdf> (hereinafter "Palestine Report")

³ See Palestine Report', page 41.

⁴ See Palestine Report', page 49.

- In February, the SRG grabbed, punched, slammed and dogpiled multiple youth (including one minor) as they protested on the sidewalk.⁵
- In early March, an individual was left convulsing on the ground after being brutalized by the NYPD. The police refused pleas by credentialed healthcare professionals to provide treatment.⁶
- On International Women’s Day, NYPD’s SRG began arresting people at jail support and reportedly knocked a person unconscious by slamming their head onto the pavement.⁷

This violence is not a coincidence, but by SRG design. **We should not have to choose between safety and participating in our democracy by protesting, yet the SRG necessitates that protesters risk violence at the hands of police officers when they show up on the streets. This risks the safety of New Yorkers and the sanctity of our democracy.**

The mayor’s preliminary budget continues to fund the SRG’s abuses. An estimated total cost of the SRG is \$133.7 Million⁸, including an estimated \$65.6 Million from centrally allocated expenses. There is almost no transparency around the size, scope, and funding of the SRG. Because of this, the size of the SRG can fluctuate based on the NYPD’s desires. In 2020, 1,300 officers were reportedly added⁹ to the unit to police protests across New York City. There is no transparency around the personnel funding required for that addition, or any system of accountability for how & when officers are arbitrarily added to the SRG’s command. We need a full accounting of the cost, size, and scope of the unit. Its tens of millions in funds should be reinvested into resources and programs that support New Yorkers.

While funding is poured into the SRG, the Mayor’s Office had made almost \$400 M in cuts to pre-k & 3-k programs since 2022 and the city plans to cut another 14% of that budget in FY25.¹⁰

In the November plan, the Mayor's Office had made significant cuts to language access and legal

⁵ See Within Our Lifetime (February 21, 2024) available at <https://x.com/WOLPalestine/status/1760460081932488716?s=20>

⁶ Reports, (March 9, 2024) available at <https://x.com/taliaotg/status/1766611885820882998?s=20> and <https://x.com/taliaotg/status/1766611806586322971?s=20>

⁷ See New York Civil Liberties Union (March 8, 2024) available at <https://x.com/NYCLU/status/1766514793504968760?s=20>

⁸ See Communities United For Police Reform, *Creating Safe and Vibrant Communities for All New Yorkers*, (June 2022), pp. 26, available at https://www.changethenypd.org/sites/default/files/2022-06_creating_safe_and_vibrant_communities_for_all_new_yorkers_optimized.pdf

⁹ See The Gothamist, *How An NYPD Anti-Terror Squad Became A Tool For Cracking Down On Protests*, (February 19, 2021) available at <https://gothamist.com/news/how-elite-anti-terror-squad-transformed-nypds-approach-protest-policing>

¹⁰ See MSN, *In advance of Monday's hearing, parents rally to prevent cuts to New York City's preschool program*, (March 18, 2024) available at <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/in-advance-of-monday-s-hearing-parents-rally-to-prevent-cuts-to-new-york-city-s-preschool-program/ar-BB1k3I4m>



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services (\$600K); after school community programs (\$10M); library services (\$23.6M); cultural development and cultural institutions (\$8.6M); the participatory budget program, racial equity initiatives, and civic engagement efforts (\$643K), among other services. There are also significant cuts planned for Department of Youth and Community Development-related services in FY25.¹¹

These proposals to cut crucial community services and continue to pour money into the NYPD are not in service of public safety. It is time to reinvest in our communities and help us to provide services that prioritize the true safety and well-being of New Yorkers. Thank you.

Sincerely,

/s/Lamya Agarwala

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March 22, 2024

¹¹ See Nonprofit New York, *Nonprofit New York Statement on Mayor Adams's January Plan Budget Cuts*, (January 23, 2024) available at <https://www.nonprofitnewyork.org/2024/01/why15-nonprofit-new-york-statement-on-mayor-adams-january-plan-budget-cuts/>