May 25, 2020

Electronic Mail (Drichards@council.nyc.gov)

Donovan J. Richards, Chair
Public Safety Committee
New York City Council
City Hall
250 Broadway, Committee Room, 14th floor
New York, NY

Re: Written Testimony for Public Safety Committee Oversight Hearing on New York Police Department’s Social Distancing Enforcement

Dear Chairman Richards and Public Safety Committee Members:

On behalf of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., (“LDF”), we submit written testimony for the record of the Public Safety Committee’s hearing held on May 22, 2020 concerning the New York City Police Department’s (“NYPD”) enforcement of social distancing rules during the COVID-19 pandemic. We welcome the Committee’s prompt NYPD oversight hearing following weeks of aggressive and racially biased policing practices related to the enforcement of social distancing rules created to prevent the spread of the novel COVID-19 virus. As videos and data representing the NYPD’s enforcement practices have revealed, officers have used enforcement tactics that were not preventive, but abusive. We urge the City Council to use its legislative and oversight authority to: 1) support efforts to shift the enforcement of social distancing and other public health rules from the NYPD to agencies charged with administration of public health and social well-being concerns of New Yorkers; 2) support ending NYPD’s enforcement of all low-level and non-violent offenses during COVID-19’s national health pandemic; 3) promote a public-health approach to public safety by approving a budget that increases funding to social services programs and agencies that are best positioned to seek compliance with public health orders and respond to social problems; and 4) advance policies that promote impartial and accountable policing practices, such as the repeal of Civil Rights Law 50-a (“CRL 50-a”) and the Post Act.

Since its founding in 1940, LDF has served as the foremost civil rights organization advocating for the rights of Black people across this country. In these 80 years, LDF has used litigation, policy advocacy, and community organizing to address violent and unlawful policing practices at the national, state, and local level, including work through its Policing Reform
Campaign. The Campaign has partnered with federal and local policymakers to advance unbiased and accountable policing practices in Ferguson, Missouri; Baltimore, Maryland; North Charleston, South Carolina; and New York City, to name a few cities.\textsuperscript{1} LDF also serves as co-counsel in \textit{Davis v. City of New York}, a federal class-action lawsuit that challenged the NYPD’s policy and practice of unlawfully stopping and arresting Black and Latinx New York City Housing Authority residents and their visitors for trespassing.\textsuperscript{2} These experiences give us a unique perspective on NYPD’s abusive and racially-biased policing practices and inform the recommendations below on how to protect and serve New York’s Black and Brown communities during this COVID-19 pandemic.

\section{Support Efforts to End NYPD’s Violent and Racially Biased Enforcement of Social Distancing Orders, Which Has Been Ineffective to Prevent the Spread of Covid-19}

New York City is the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic,\textsuperscript{3} reaching a peak of 367,625 cases of individuals contracting the virus and 29,138 deaths to date.\textsuperscript{4} In March 2020, as city leaders released orders to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus, including the requirement to shelter-in-place and follow social distancing guidelines if residents left their homes, the NYPD’s enforcement of these public health rules almost immediately targeted communities of color.\textsuperscript{5} According to news reports, from March 16 through May 5, 2020, NYPD officers issued 374 summonses for social distancing violations, with 81\% of those summonses being issued to Black and brown residents.\textsuperscript{6} This is consistent with the Legal Aid Society, Inc.’s May 2020 report which found that although only 46.2\% of 311 calls reporting social distancing violations came from majority Black and Latinx precincts, NYPD issued an alarming 78.9\% of COVID-19 related summonses and 74.1\% of COVID-19 related arrests in majority Black or Latinx precincts.\textsuperscript{7}

Further, the NYPD’s pattern of using excessive force during its social distancing enforcement with people of color quickly emerged. For example:

\begin{itemize}
  \item In the East Village, NYPD officers arrested two people for failing to follow social distancing rules even though they were reportedly communicating with each other from a distance. As a Black bystander observed the arrests and began speaking to one of the arresting officers, the officer is caught on video calling the bystander the n-word, then beating the man’s head and torso with closed fists and placing his knee on the man’s neck while he arrested him.\textsuperscript{8}
  \item In a New York Subway, multiple NYPD officers surrounded, threw on the ground, and forcibly arrested a 22-year old woman of color in front of her small child for allegedly failing to wear her face mask properly.\textsuperscript{9}
  \item In Brooklyn, multiple NYPD officers aggressively arrested three Black men for failing to social distance. One officer violently knocked one of the men to the ground, rendering him unconscious; the officer then flipped the man’s unconscious
\end{itemize}
body over and forced his face and limber body into the hard concrete, before placing a knee on the man’s back and handcuffing him.  

These enforcement tactics are in stark contrast to NYPD’s interactions with white New Yorkers who similarly violate social distancing requirements. In predominately white or affluent neighborhoods officers seemingly routinely ignore social distancing violations, issue verbal reminders to social distance, or provide face masks to residents in lieu of violent arrests and citations. In fact, even though the majority of 311 calls reporting social distancing violations (more than 53%) came from predominately white precincts, less than 22% of all social distancing arrests and summonses took place in those precincts. During this same time period, the NYPD issued the highest amount of COVID-19 related arrests or summonses per 10,000 people in majority Black or Latinx precincts.  

Disturbingly, NYPD’s enforcement of COVID-19 social distancing rules bears a striking resemblance to the Department’s racially discriminatory practice of stopping and frisking Black and Latinx residents without cause, which was ruled unconstitutional by a federal judge in 2013, as well as NYPD’s policy of stopping, questioning and arresting for trespass Black and Latinx public housing residents and their guests. With this history of racially discriminatory enforcement practices appearing again through its social distancing enforcement, we have little confidence that NYPD is capable of seeking compliance with public health rules without resorting to racially-biased and oftentimes violent punitive measures. Accordingly, we stand with advocates for equality and safety, medical professionals, the NYC Police Benevolent Association, city officials, and the numerous impacted community members who testified at the May 22 Public Safety Committee Hearing, in declaring: city leaders must immediately end NYPD’s enforcement of all rules aimed at preventing the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

First, the NYPD’s racially discriminatory policing counteracts any public health efforts to reduce the spread of COVID-19 because it exacerbates the risk of contamination. While social distancing is undeniably critical to the safety and health of residents, the racially discriminatory and violent manner that NYPD selectively enforces social distancing against people of color ignores health and safety protocols and unnecessarily places Black and Latinx residents at greater risk of COVID contraction because officers, who are often not wearing masks, come into close contact with residents as they engage in stops, summonses, and arrests. Additionally, NYPD officers’ discretion to arrest residents places those residents at risk of contracting the virus because social distancing is not possible in vehicles and jails. This in turn places New York’s first responders, medical professionals, essential workers, children, teachers, families, and many more at risk—all due to unnecessary and discriminatory NYPD engagement.

Additionally, as New York City Council Speaker Corey Johnson noted at the hearing, “we cannot arrest our way out of this problem,” especially in neighborhoods already scarred by decades of police inequality. COVID-19 is a public health crisis and therefore should be resolved by public health and social service experts, and community-centered organizations who understand...
the unique complexities, cultures, and languages of the vulnerable communities most impacted by COVID-19. Allowing these groups to lead a public health response that centers around public education and provision of services will more effectively produce collective compliance.

Ending NYPD’s enforcement of social distancing and other public health rules during the COVID-19 pandemic prioritizes the health and safety of New Yorkers over criminalization and enforcement, and ensures all residents have unbiased access to resources, support, and education, delivered in a compassionate and kind manner.

II. Support Ending NYPD’s Enforcement of All Low-Level and Non-Violent Offense During COVID-19’s National Health Pandemic

The same health and safety concerns that are present with NYPD’s enforcement of social distancing violations are also present with NYPD’s enforcement of low-level and non-violent offenses during a national health pandemic. Accordingly, we urge you to similarly push to eliminating NYPD enforcement of all low level and non-violent offenses during a national health pandemic. This approach promotes the health and safety of all New Yorkers and is consistent with law enforcement officials’ response to the pandemic nationally. For example, New York City prosecutors are refraining from prosecuting low-level and nonviolent offenses and prosecutors in Baltimore have announced a moratorium on prosecuting all drug possession and other non-violent crimes, including prostitution, trespassing, minor traffic offenses, and open container laws. Indeed, numerous civil rights, law enforcement officials and criminal justice reform advocates recently released joint principles on advancing public safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. These principles urged state and local governments to “stop making arrests and detentions for offenses that pose no imminent harm to others and are not a threat to the public safety to the maximum extent possible.”

III. Promote a Public-Health Approach to Public Safety by Approving a Budget That Shifts Funds from NYPD’s Budget and Increases Funding to Social Services

Both in relation to COVID-19 and in the greater effort to keep New York safe, city leadership has centered law enforcement in the solution to public safety issues. Accordingly, the city has funded NYPD to engage in law enforcement activities to address social issues that public health and social service agencies are best suited to respond to, such as youth services, education, mental health, homelessness, and disability, among others. Consequently, with NYPD’s nearly $6 billion inflated budget, New York City is currently spending more on policing than on health, homeless services, youth development, and workforce development combined. COVID-19 has exposed how vital but largely under-resourced health and social services are to residents’ wellness and safety. Fully supporting residents means providing a strong public health infrastructure, accessible and affordable housing, quality education, environmental justice, access to healthy food, disability services, access to healthcare, worker protections and all of the...
additional elements needed for strong citywide infrastructure which guarantee the basic needs of all residents to thrive.\textsuperscript{29} Placing law enforcement in these spaces or underfunding these services in favor of law enforcement ignores the realities and critical needs of residents. We urge you to use the lessons from COVID-19 to invest the City’s resources into a strong public health infrastructure, human and social services, and racial and economic equality rather than criminalization and enforcement. Several recommendations on how to reduce and divert the NYPD’s budget have been presented by city council members and advocates which we urge you to consider, including: placing a hiring freeze on NYPD budget items that do not support the health and wellness of communities during COVID-19 (such as police officers in schools), demanding itemized budget transparency from the NYPD, and investing significant resources into key alternatives to policing to create more avenues of support for New Yorkers in need.\textsuperscript{30}

IV. Support Policies that Promote Unbiased and Accountable Policing Practices

The structural and systemic failings that protect officers who commit egregious misconduct will continue beyond issues related to COVID-19 if City leadership does not make long-lasting changes that prioritize the safety, health, and livelihood of communities of color. Because the NYPD cannot be relied upon to police itself or properly discipline officers who engage in misconduct, we urge the New York City Council to supports the repeal of New York State Civil Rights Law 50-a\textsuperscript{31} and the passage of the Public Oversight of Surveillance Technology (“POST”) Act.\textsuperscript{32}

First, pass Council Resolution 750 to support a full repeal of CRL 50-a. CRL 50-a broadly conceals officer misconduct, disciplinary records, and essentially anything that can be in an officer’s personnel file, from public view.\textsuperscript{33} The NYPD’s notorious failure to appropriately discipline officers who engage in misconduct—even when they commit egregious misconduct like excessive force, sexual assault, perjury, and writing false reports—coupled with 50-a’s cloak of officer secrecy from the public, creates an impenetrable and unnecessary protection of officers who are a danger to the communities they serve.\textsuperscript{34} This was evidenced in the 2014 killing of Eric Garner where Officer Pantaleo’s history of excessive violence towards Black men went undisciplined and unknown to the public—until he killed Eric Garner for selling cigarettes, and eventually his disciplinary file was leaked. Six years later Officer Francisco Garcia was caught on camera brutally beating an unarmed Black bystander who allegedly was not following social distancing rules.\textsuperscript{35} Officer Garcia, like Officer Pantaleo, appears to have a history of excessive force and continued violations of NYPD policy; the NYPD allowed both men to continue to police the very neighborhoods they had previously harmed, without ever informing residents of their violent and dangerous records.

Second, require NYPD transparency and ensure oversight of its use of surveillance technology through passage of the POST Act. The POST Act requires the NYPD to be accountable to the public in its use of surveillance technology by disclosing basic information.\textsuperscript{36} Under the Act, the NYPD must disclose what surveillance and technology tools it is using on the public, what information those tools collect from the public, and whether the Department has policies in place.
to ensure its use of such tools does not violate the civil right and liberties of the New Yorkers. During an age when New Yorkers have discovered the persistent racial biases in NYPD’s use of tools like facial recognition software, the NYPD’s gang database, and predictive policing tools, residents are owed this transparency and public oversight. New York City must join cities all over the country who have enacted oversight and transparency requirements to ensure that police secrecy does not compromise civil and human rights.

In sum, we implore you to evaluate the city’s inequities that COVID-19 has brought to the forefront and use this opportunity to create meaningful and long-lasting changes that support the health, safety, and equitable treatment of all New Yorkers. Now, more than ever, residents rely on your leadership. Accordingly, we urge you to adopt the following recommendations:

1. Support the wide-spread demands to end NYPD enforcement of all social distancing rules, including any contact tracing and COVID-related surveillance;

2. Call for a moratorium on NYPD’s enforcement of all low-level and non-violent offenses during COVID-19;

3. Make meaningful reductions to the NYPD’s inflated $6 billion budget, including a hiring freeze on NYPD officers in schools, and instead divert funds to support healthcare; social, mental, and youth services; education; and additional public health programs that are equipped to address social challenges, such as social distancing;

4. Mandate NYPD budget transparency by requiring that the Department, like other agencies, itemize its budgeted program areas;

5. Pass Council Resolution 750 to support the full repeal of CRL 50-a and the POST Act to prevent NYPD’s current disciplinary failures, lack of transparency, and police violence from continuing aside from the current problems with COVID-19-related enforcement;

6. Continue to hold the NYPD accountable to the citizens it serves by demanding that NYPD timely furnish the following information, disaggregated by race, ethnicity, age, time period, and location:
   a. The specific crimes for which the NYPD has issued summonses or made arrests where the interaction began as—or was in any way connected to—social-distancing enforcement, and the total number of summonses and/or arrests for those specific crimes;
   b. All surveillance and/or tracking of residents by NYPD purportedly in connection with COVID-19 and/or social distancing enforcement;
7. Request the NYPD specify:
   a. How many officers are patrolling neighborhoods for COVID-19 enforcement and how the Department has determined where officers will execute such patrols, including whether the Department is using prior crime data and hot spots to determine officer patrol assignments; and
   b. How street encounters related to social distancing enforcement are documented and associated stop report, summonses, memo book entries and other NYPD documentation of such encounters.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact Katurah Topps at us at 212-965-2200.

Sincerely,

Katurah Topps
Policy Counsel

Monique Dixon
Deputy Director of Policy and
Director of State Advocacy

7 This information is based on the data for which the Legal Aid Society was able to identify a precinct. See The Legal Aid Society, Racial Disparities in NYPD’s COVID-19 Policing: Unequal Enforcement of 311 Social Distancing Calls
It is alarming. The situation is untenable: the NYPD needs to get cops out of the social distancing enforcement business altogether."

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12 311 REPORT, supra note 7, at 1-3 (noting that four of the five precincts that received the most 311 calls complaining of social distancing violations were in neighborhoods that are not majority Black or Latino).

13 Id.


15 See Davis, supra note 2.


19 Press Release, N.Y. State Office of the Att’y Gen., AG James Calls on the NYPD to Ensure Equal Social Distancing Enforcement in NYC Communities (May 13, 2020), https://ag.ny.gov/press-release/2020/ag-james-calls-nypd-ensure-equal-social-distancing-enforcement-nyc-communities, (“The apparent unequal enforcement of social distancing policies is deeply troubling, and deepens the divide between law enforcement and the people they are tasked to protect.”); see also Jarrett Murphy Eric Adams Says Cops Should Not Enforce Social Distancing, CITY LIMITS (May 7, 2020), https://citylimits.org/2020/05/07/eric-adams-says-cops-should-not-enforce-social-distancing, (“When you talk about police officers enforcing social distancing, the police department that has historical tension in certain communities, you’re now encouraging the largest interaction with these groups in the history of the police department. It is alarming.”).

20 Oversight Hearing on NYPD Enforcement on Social Distancing Before the Comm. on Public Safety, (May 22, 2020) (public testimony portion).


23 Rebecca Rosenberg, NYC DAs won’t prosecute most social distancing-related arrests, New York Post (May 12, 2020, 8:54PM), https://nypost.com/2020/05/12/nyc-das-wont-prosecute-most-social-distancing-related-arrests/.


See Communities United for Police Reform, More Than 110 Organizations Call On Mayor De Blasio And Speaker Johnson To Cut The NYPD’s Budget, Redirect Resources To City Agencies That Can Help Communities Hit Hardest By Covid-19 (Apr. 30, 2020), https://www.changethenypd.org/releases/more-110-organizations-call-mayor-de-blasio-and-speaker-johnson-cut-nypd%E2%80%99s-budget-redirect (“It’s time to defund the NYPD’s harmful expansion into homeless services, schools, youth services, mental health and other social services where police don’t belong. It’s time to protect investments in human services, the social safety net, racial and economic justice, and the vision that all New Yorkers deserve to thrive.”).

Much of the NYPD’s budget allocation are largely unknown to the public because the NYPD, unlike other public-facing agencies, has not itemized its budget by program area.

See Mayor Bill De Blasio, The City of New York Adopted Budget Fiscal Year 2020, https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/omb/downloads/pdf/erc6-19.pdf (noting 2019 budget allocations of nearly $6 billion to the NYPD, compared to $1.9 billion for the health department; $2.1 billion for homeless services; $2.1 billion on housing, preservation, and development; $907.3 million on youth and community development; and $73.8 on workforce development).


See LDF Policy Counsel Katurah Topps Testifies Before the New York State Senate on the Need to Repeal CRL 50-a (Oct. 29, 2019), https://www.naacpldf.org/news/ldf-policy-counsel-katurah-topps-testifies-before-the-new-york-state-senate-on-the-need-to-repeal-crl-50a/ (noting that the application of the strictest police secrecy law in the country, to a police department riddled with civil rights violations and currently under federal monitoring for its unconstitutional racially discriminatory practices, protects misconducting officers, at the expense of Black and Latinx families).


Supra note 32.


Supra note 32.
