March 3rd, 2015   New York City Council – Public Safety Committee

Greetings to the Esteemed City Council,

I am submitting this testimony on behalf of DRUM-South Asian Organizing Center. DRUM fights for low-wage workers, South Asian immigrants, and issues such as unfair policing of our communities. We join many other New Yorkers in being concerned about the proposal to add 1000 police officers to the NYPD. We are also gravely concerned of how the scope of policing is being expanded in the name of "community policing." While the idea of community policing sounds quite benevolent, it has no agreed upon definitions, and in practice it has resulted in policing being used as the primary solution for every social problem. This moment presents an opportunity to raise broader questions about our city, our understanding of social problems versus issues of crime, our budget allocations, and subsequently our priorities.

IN OUR SCHOOLS: The implementation of this philosophy of in our public schools has been devastating. New York City spends $227 million a year on school policing to put police, safety agents, and metal detectors as the solution to normal youth behaviors, rather than investing in teaching conflict resolution skills or restorative justice practices. NYC public schools have 5,200 School Safety Agents, which is larger than entire police forces of some cities, but only 3,100 school guidance counselors. What message does that send to our young people?

IN OUR STREETS: It is suggested that these 1000 additional police officers would relieve the burden for aggressive policing, so that they can spend more time building better relations with communities, perhaps by working with neighborhoods to fix potholes, help kids with homework, intervene in potential flaring of violence, or assist homeless New Yorkers with finding shelter. However, for the same amount of money, we could be investing in hiring a lot more social workers, teachers, violence intervention and community outreach workers, and expanding social services. Why should our already overpoliced communities have to resort to the police to fix every social problem?

IN SURVEILLANCE: In the name of community policing, several community outreach efforts have been launched over the years only to later be revealed as doubling for intelligence gathering efforts. Documents published by the Associated Press indicate that the NYPD has used outreach activities such as youth cricket leagues and mosque visits as a cover for intelligence collection. Using community outreach as little more than a front for intelligence gathering is a shortsighted strategy that erodes community trust and is counterproductive. Community outreach and intelligence gathering should not and cannot be mixed together.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
- The City Council should begin to reallocate funds from the NYPD School Safety Division to restorative justice programs in schools
- The City Council should pass the Right to Know Act to create greater transparency in police and community interactions
- The Public Safety Committee should hold hearings into the NYPD's surveillance programs targeting Muslim and activist communities

Policing, whether expansive surveillance or policing in the streets or in the schools, cannot be the answer to all of our social problems. It not only results in the overpolicing of our communities, but also places undue burdens on the police that they are not equipped to handle. How we allocate our city's resources reflects on our priorities and our expectations of our communities. Are we investing in the building of education, employment, and harmony of our communities, or are we investing in the criminalization of our communities?

Testimony presented by: DRUM – Desis Rising Up & Moving