COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES ON PROTEST, POLICING, AND ACCOUNTABILITY
ROUNDTABLE FINDINGS BRIEF

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The Protest Testimony Project is part of the community engagement component of the settlement agreement addressing the NYPD's response to the 2020 protests. Our role is to gather the experiences of people participating in First Amendment Activity and help ensure that the NYPD follows the terms of the settlement.

This report synthesizes themes from eleven community roundtables with slightly more than 130 distinct participants occurring between April 15, 2026, and September 30, 2026. Roundtables provided community education around the Settlement terms and transitioned into open discussions of experiences of NYPD protest response, public understanding of the tiered response system, perceptions of police accountability, and more.

Across all discussions, participants described a disconnect between the protections and standards they understood the FAA to represent and their experiences of police presence and conduct. Participants' accounts suggest that this disconnect is not limited to the moments when force is used. Police visibility, barricades, surveillance, unclear instructions, and uncertainty about interagency involvement can shape whether people attend demonstrations, how they move through protest spaces, whether they document police activity, and whether they trust formal protections to provide meaningful safeguards.

Five themes emerged across the discussions:

1. NYPD presence and crowd-control tactics during First Amendment activities (FAAs) create barriers to protest participation and documentation.
2. Youth and campus protesters report physical violence, intimidation, and inconsistent police conduct.
3. Local community experiences of police presence/conduct shape trust in police and expectations of how police will act at the FAA.
4. Perceived NYPD and federal agency coordination raises concerns about protest safety and hinders participation.
5. Participants were not familiar with settlement provisions, violation-reporting procedures, and police accountability processes.

This report reflects participant accounts and perceptions, but is not a representative assessment of all protesters or communities.

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES ON PROTEST, POLICING, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

PURPOSE & APPROACH

The Protest Testimony Project community education roundtables created space for participants to discuss their experiences and observations of NYPD conduct at protests. Additionally, participants were invited to reflect on their experiences, identify questions about protest rights, discuss experiences, and introduce concerns of their own.

The discussions brought together participants with different relationships to protest activity, including undergraduate students, youth, first-time protesters, people with prior arrest experiences, people attending recent demonstrations, and individuals who had never attended a protest but attended other community-based events such as rallies, celebrations, and marches. Participants drew on direct experiences, observations of police conduct, prior encounters with law enforcement, and concerns shared within their communities.

This report synthesizes the primary, recurring themes that emerged during roundtables. It describes the relationships participants identified between police tactics, willingness to participate in demonstrations, awareness of the settlement terms, and lived experience. While themes are presented, each theme is not equally present in every discussion. This report also does not assume that *every* participant shares the *same* experience by the inclusions of aggregate themes. The findings are qualitative and exploratory. They describe the experiences, observations, questions, and perceptions captured at the roundtables.

FINDINGS

1. NYPD presence and crowd-control tactics during First Amendment activities (FAAs) create barriers to protest participation and documentation

Participants described police presence as fluctuating across demonstrations, locations, and different types of public activity, and as potentially dependent on the theme of the FAA. In some settings, police appeared to take a comparatively less escalatory posture, allowing amplified sound, marching, and continued demonstration without arrests. In other settings, particularly at Pride celebrations, the West Indian Day Parade, protests in support of Palestine, and campuses, participants described extensive deployments, restrictive crowd management, and police positioning that appeared to limit movement and the ability to reach an intended audience.

These contrasting experiences contributed to uncertainty about what protesters could expect from NYPD at different events. Participants described significant deployments of uniformed officers and specialized units, including Strategic Response Group (SRG), counterterrorism personnel, Community Affairs officers, and technical surveillance units (TARU). Some participants perceived the number of officers deployed as disproportionate to the number of demonstrators present.

Crowd control and restricted movement

Participants identified police vehicles and their positioning as crowd-control methods that could restrict movement and direct or contain demonstrators. During one account shared at a youth roundtable,

participants described a march toward a college campus involving approximately 50 to 70 protesters. Multiple NYPD vans reportedly followed the march, with vehicles repeatedly moving into protesters' space, blocking their path, and directing them away from the street. Participants perceived the police response as increasingly escalatory as the march approached campus.

Participants described a substantial deployment of NYPD vans and patrol cars near the campus, with police reportedly outnumbering protesters by approximately two to one, excluding campus security. They reported that officers used barricades to push protesters away from campus gates and that closed campus entrances, combined with police and campus security positioning, effectively confined demonstrators to the sidewalk.

Officers reportedly threatened arrest if protesters remained in the street but did not issue dispersal orders. Despite the reported physical pushing and restrictions on movement, protesters were able to continue their program for approximately another hour before dispersing without arrests. This account illustrates how participants experienced significant restrictions on movement even when a demonstration continued and concluded without arrests.

Participants also questioned why the police response intensified as the march approached campus, despite the route having been published in advance. These observations raised broader questions about how police determine their posture, deploy vehicles, and manage crowds as demonstrations move between locations.

Barriers, designated zones, and distance from intended audiences

Participants described extensive use of barricades, fenced areas, designated protest zones, buffer zones, restricted exits, and one-way pedestrian routes that limited their ability to enter, leave, reposition themselves, or reach the people they intended to address. Some concerns involved demonstrations near religious institutions, high-profile political events, and other public gatherings.

Participants and observers described substantial differences in the distances protesters were permitted to maintain from their intended locations. Accounts of buffer zones at some actions were contrasted with a separate demonstration where protesters were permitted to remain directly across the street from the event venue. These comparisons contributed to questions about how protest boundaries are established, why restrictions differ across events, and whether the resulting arrangements provide meaningful opportunities for people to be seen and heard.

The campus march account provides a concrete example of these concerns. Participants described closed campus entrances and the combined positioning of police, vehicles, barricades, and campus security as limiting access to campus and confining protesters to the sidewalk. Participants also raised concerns about large exclusion areas in circumstances where they questioned the legal or policy basis for the restrictions.

Restrictions communicated through physical infrastructure

Roundtable participants who attended protests described restrictions as frequently communicated through barricades, fencing, vehicle placement, and officer positioning rather than direct engagement or dialogue. In these accounts, uncertainty about police intentions and expectations made it difficult to understand what conduct was permitted, what restrictions were being imposed, and what consequences might follow.

During the campus march, participants reported that officers threatened arrest for remaining in the street without issuing clear orders for the protest to end. Students and National Lawyers Guild

representatives reportedly attempted to engage Community Affairs officers and encourage de-escalation, but participants said these efforts did not meaningfully change the police response.

This account raised questions about the distinction between instructions to leave the street and formal dispersal orders, how restrictions should be communicated, and what protesters are expected to do when officers block their path. It also illustrated participants' uncertainty about how the settlement's tiered approach applies when police presence and crowd-control tactics intensify.

2. Youth and campus protesters report physical violence, intimidation, and inconsistent police conduct

Reported physical force and intimidation

Youth participants described being chased, arrested, and physically handled by police during, around, and outside of First Amendment activities. One participant reported being arrested on a subway without understanding the reason and being held overnight. Another described being questioned by officers at a parade and then physically thrown into a trash receptacle after declining to answer questions, resulting in a bleeding mouth and transport to a precinct.

Questions were also raised about how officers respond to young people gathered in public spaces, including youth gatherings characterized in public discussion as large "takeovers." These concerns included the use of specialized units, crowd-control tactics, and enforcement practices that participants perceived as aggressive or potentially discriminatory. Participants questioned whether responses to these gatherings could implicate protections for assembly or other First Amendment activity.

Participants' accounts of campus demonstrations raised related concerns about physical handling and intimidation. During one reported march toward a college campus, participants described officers pushing protesters with barricades as they approached campus gates. Although the demonstration continued without arrests, participants reported that police positioning and barricades restricted movement and contributed to an atmosphere of containment.

Uncertainty about police authority and expectations

Participants asked questions about when police may make arrests, what warnings or instructions should be provided, how individuals should respond to force, and what options exist after an encounter. Their questions reflected uncertainty about how police authority operates in practice and how community members can distinguish between lawful enforcement and conduct they believe is improper.

The campus march account illustrated these questions in practice. Participants reported that officers threatened arrest if demonstrators remained in the street but did not issue dispersal orders. They questioned how protesters should interpret these instructions, particularly when police vehicles and barricades restrict their ability to continue along a route.

Participants also questioned how officers accused of misconduct face consequences. Some expressed concern that reassignment or desk duty would not adequately address reported misconduct. In one account, a participant described looking up an officer's information in a former public police misconduct database and finding multiple complaints.

Inconsistent conduct across events and officers

Participants described police responses as varying by event, location, political content, and the officers or units involved. Some perceived more aggressive or punitive responses toward Palestinian

solidarity demonstrations than toward counterprotesters. Others questioned the role of Community Affairs officers when their observed conduct did not align with expectations that those officers would facilitate communication or de-escalation. For example, one participant shared witnessing a Community Affairs officer throwing a barricade at a protester.

During one campus demonstration, participants reported that students and National Lawyers Guild representatives attempted to engage Community Affairs officers and encourage de-escalation, but said these efforts did not meaningfully change the police response, nor were they always visible and therefore, accessible. Participants also questioned why police posture intensified as demonstrators approached campus despite the march route having been published in advance.

These accounts contributed to broader questions about consistency in police conduct, the factors shaping deployment decisions, and whether communication and de-escalation practices are applied consistently across events.

Campus security and institutional coordination

College participants raised concerns about campus security and its relationship with NYPD during student demonstrations. Some described campus security as intimidating or comparable in its impact to police presence. Others expressed concern that coordination between campus security and NYPD could contribute to an atmosphere of surveillance, containment, or escalation.

In one account, participants reported that campus entrances were closed and that the combined presence of campus security and NYPD effectively confined protesters to the sidewalk. This raised questions about how institutional security decisions and police tactics interact to shape access to campus and the ability to demonstrate.

Students' and youth accounts provide important information about how police practices are experienced by individuals navigating protest participation, arrest, and accountability processes. Their experiences also raise questions about the consistency of police conduct, the transparency of enforcement decisions, and the role of educational institutions in protecting access to public space and expression.

3. Local community experiences of police presence and conduct shape trust in police and expectations of how they will act during FAAs

Police presence at cultural and community expressive events

Participants at nearly every roundtable described heavy police presence and enforcement at cultural celebrations, parades, festivals, and other public gatherings as part of the broader context through which they understand police conduct and priorities. Events mentioned included Pride celebrations, J'ouvert, the West Indian Day Parade, the Dominican Day Parade, and the Puerto Rican Day Parade.

Concerns also arose about policing in predominantly Black and Brown neighborhoods and in LGBTQ+ -related spaces and actions. These observations prompted questions about potential disparities in enforcement and whether particular communities experience public gatherings as sites of heightened police attention.

Participants also raised concerns about the policing of Black-led, LGBTQ+, and pro-Palestinian demonstrations. Some questioned whether the political content of a gathering or the communities organizing it influenced police posture and enforcement.

These experiences informed participants' expectations of how NYPD might respond during demonstrations and other First Amendment activities. Participants' concerns about police presence,

physical force, and surveillance reflected accumulated experiences across community settings rather than only what occurred at a particular protest.

4. Perceived NYPD and federal agency coordination raises concerns about protest safety and hinders participation

Concerns about federal agency presence and information-sharing

Participants questioned why federal agents might be present in protest settings and expressed uncertainty about the relationship between federal agencies and NYPD. Some suspected coordination or information-sharing and worried that information collected during demonstrations could be used for immigration enforcement or other purposes. Federal immigration enforcement was named repeatedly as a deterrent to attending protests and shaped community views of all officers present when discussed.

These concerns were particularly acute for participants who perceived immigration-related consequences as a possible risk. For them, police filming, identification, social media monitoring, and the collection of information about organizers could carry consequences beyond the demonstration itself.

Surveillance and the decision to participate

Participants' concerns about federal agency involvement intersected with broader concerns about physical and digital surveillance. They described officers filming demonstrators, monitoring organizers' social media activity, and positioning themselves near transportation hubs, exits, and gathering points. Some perceived these practices as anticipatory monitoring that extended beyond managing the immediate event.

Participants described weighing the value of attending demonstrations against possible risks, including arrest, surveillance, retaliation, immigration consequences, and professional or social repercussions. Some reported avoiding protests or other First Amendment activities because of these concerns. Others wanted to become more involved but were uncertain how to participate safely.

Concerns about immigration enforcement also affected the project's ability to gather community feedback on demonstrations related to immigration advocacy and ICE raids. These challenges illustrate how the perceived risks of being identified, sharing information, or discussing an encounter involving law enforcement can limit the information community members feel safe providing. The same concerns that make community documentation especially important can also make people less willing or able to share their experiences through feedback and oversight processes.

The difficulty gathering feedback should not be interpreted as an indication that community members had no concerns or that the incident had no impact. Rather, it highlights the importance of building trust, communicating the purpose and limits of the feedback process, and recognizing that fear of immigration enforcement can affect participation in community-based monitoring.

Participants' accounts indicate that formal protections governing police conduct and their broader concerns about federal enforcement operate in overlapping but distinct contexts. Understanding one does not automatically eliminate the risks or uncertainties associated with the other.

Concerns about federal agency involvement and possible information-sharing can affect whether people feel safe exercising their rights. Public-facing information should distinguish the responsibilities of different agencies, explain the scope and limits of settlement protections, and avoid leaving communities to rely on speculation about who is monitoring demonstrations or how information may be used.

5. Participants were not familiar with settlement provisions, violation-reporting procedures, and police accountability processes

Participants' familiarity with the settlement varied, but many were unfamiliar with its existence or the specific reforms intended to govern NYPD responses to First Amendment activity before attending a roundtable. Participants also raised questions about how to recognize potential violations, document incidents, report concerns, and determine what happens after a complaint is submitted.

Participants expressed appreciation for learning about expectations related to de-escalation, limits on the use of force, communication, crowd management, and protections for people engaging in First Amendment activity.

Participants described documenting police conduct through videos, photographs, social media posts, and informal community networks. Some sought information about officers and prior complaints. Others expressed concern that recording or sharing information could expose them to surveillance or retaliation. They also asked questions about police authority, arrests, consequences for misconduct, and whether officers accused of improper conduct would face meaningful accountability.

The campus demonstration account illustrates the practical questions participants raised about applying settlement protections. Participants described vehicles and barricades restricting movement, officers threatening arrest without issuing dispersal orders, and attempts to engage Community Affairs officers that did not meaningfully change the response. They questioned how police should communicate restrictions, how demonstrators can proceed when officers block their path, and how the settlement's tiered approach applies when police presence and crowd-control tactics intensify.

Learning about settlement provisions was informative for participants who were previously unfamiliar with them. However, learning about protections did not necessarily resolve concerns about immigration enforcement, surveillance, or the consequences of being identified at a demonstration. Participants' questions also demonstrated a need for continued education about the settlement and how its provisions apply to real-world situations.

Considerations

Across the five themes, several broader considerations emerge.

First, **police responses are experienced as inconsistent and difficult to anticipate.** Participants described variation in police posture, staffing, communication, crowd-control tactics, and restrictions across events and locations. These differences made it difficult to anticipate what police would do or what conditions would apply at a demonstration. In one account, participants questioned why police posture intensified as a march approached a college campus despite the route having been published in advance.

Second, **extensive physical restrictions can affect participation without arrests or obvious use of force.** Barriers, officer positioning, vehicle placement, surveillance technologies, and restrictions on movement affected individuals' ability to participate and reach intended audiences. Participants described vehicles entering demonstrators' space, barricades restricting movement, and closed campus entrances that effectively confined protesters to the sidewalk. Although the demonstration continued and concluded without arrests, participants reported physical pushing, restricted movement, and uncertainty about police intentions. These experiences underscore the importance of examining the conditions under which people exercise their First Amendment rights, not solely whether arrests occur.

Third, **fear of the NYPD is shaped by both direct experience and anticipated consequences.** Participants' concerns included prior arrests and encounters with police, surveillance, retaliation, immigration consequences, and possible professional or social repercussions. These concerns influenced decisions about whether to attend demonstrations, how visibly to participate, and whether to document police conduct. The perceived possibility of being identified or monitored can itself become a barrier to participation, even when an individual has not personally experienced a specific consequence. Participants' accounts centered on how police behave both in everyday interactions and First Amendment activities, whether their actions are consistent with stated expectations, and whether alleged misconduct is addressed.

Fourth, **fear of immigration enforcement can also limit community feedback and oversight.** The feedback about police encounters at FAA demonstrations related to immigration advocacy, like the November 29 Chinatown ICE raid, demonstrate that concerns about identification and potential immigration consequences can affect not only participation in public demonstrations but also people's willingness or ability to report what occurred afterward. This creates a challenge for community-based monitoring, as the barriers that prevent people from sharing their experiences may also limit the information available for review. These gaps should be considered when interpreting the feedback collected during the review period.

Finally, **broader experiences shape expectations of police conduct.** Trust in police is shaped by accumulated experience, not solely by knowledge of a particular policy or settlement. Community experiences across demonstrations, cultural gatherings, and other public settings influence whether people believe police will respect their rights and whether accountability processes will respond meaningfully to reported misconduct. Understanding this broader context is important to assessing how settlement protections are understood and experienced by the communities they are intended to protect.

Conclusion

The roundtables show that community experiences of policing are shaped by more than what occurs during a single demonstration. Police presence, crowd-control practices, surveillance concerns, prior encounters, institutional involvement, and uncertainty about accountability can influence whether people feel able to participate in public activity and document what they observe.

Community members' questions point to a continued need for clear, accessible information about settlement protections, expectations for police conduct, and available reporting pathways. The feedback received also demonstrates that concerns about immigration enforcement can affect the ability to document community experiences and should be considered when assessing the feedback available during the review period.

Participants' accounts of campus demonstrations provide a concrete example of how police presence, restrictions on movement, and uncertainty about communication and crowd-control practices intersect. Considered alongside the broader themes, these accounts reinforce the importance of examining not only whether arrests occur but also the conditions under which people exercise their First Amendment rights.

The central finding is the relationship between formal protections and lived experience: understanding that relationship requires attention to the practices people observe, the barriers they describe, and the processes through which concerns can be reported and addressed.