

Dept. of Justice investigation finds Memphis police routinely break law, assault, terrorize and abuse residents

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On December 4, the US Department of Justice Civil Rights Division released a scathing report following a more than year-long investigation into the Memphis Police Department (MPD) and the City of Memphis. The investigation, aimed at providing a veneer of accountability, was initiated last July following the brutal police murder of 29-year-old Tyre Nichols, a completely innocent father, photographer and FedEx worker.

On January 7, 2023, police with MPD's SCORPION unit initiated a violent and unprovoked traffic stop on Nichols as he was driving home. Unmarked police swarmed Nichols' vehicle as he was waiting at a stop light and began assaulting him with fists, kicks, pepper spray and tasers, prompting a terrified Nichols to exit his vehicle and attempt to run to his mother's home, located a few blocks away.

Nichols never struck the police, but this did not stop them from chasing and beating him to death roughly a block away from his mother's house. Nichols' last words were cries to his mother for help. He died at a Memphis hospital three days later.

The SCORPION unit is a "community policing" initiative that was created by Cerelyn "C.J." Davis, the first black female police chief of MPD, in 2021 to terrorize and harass working class residents of Memphis. Undercutting the racist narrative advanced by the Democratic Party and its pseudo-left apologists that police violence is a product of "systemic racism" or "white supremacy," the five police officers in Davis's SCORPION unit who beat Nichols to death are also black.

Nichols' murder, caught on surveillance camera, provoked mass anger across the country and several protests in major cities. The DoJ's report includes damning findings that demonstrate the class character of police violence in the second-largest city in Tennessee.

The DoJ's extensive investigation included ride-alongs

with police in every precinct, interviews with judges, cops, community members and lawyers, as well as reviewing hundreds of hours of body camera footage and thousands of documents. The DoJ concluded it has "reasonable cause to believe that MPD and the City engage in a pattern or practice of conduct that deprives people of their rights under the Constitution and federal law."

While the report was focused on violations in Memphis, there is no reason to believe that if similar investigations were conducted of every major US police department the results would be any different. The report found:

- MPD uses excessive force.
- MPD conducts unlawful stops, searches and arrests.
- MPD unlawfully discriminates against black people in its enforcement activities.
- The City and MPD unlawfully discriminate in their response to people with behavioral health disabilities.

Under the guise of addressing "violent crime," Memphis police had a specific policy of "flooding neighborhoods with traffic stops," in what was described as a "saturation" approach. The DoJ noted that in a roughly five-year span, the MPD reported making over 866,000 traffic stops, while only 630,000 people live in the city. Police cited or arrested drivers over 296,000 times "predominately for minor infractions."

The DOJ noted that this practice was not limited to SCORPION-style units and has persisted "for years."

For years, MPD conducted an annual Operation Spring Cleaning and Operation Summer Heat, initiatives that concentrated patrol enforcement in certain neighborhoods. In 2019, Spring Cleaning resulted in 340 arrests and citations over a month; more than half were misdemeanors, and marijuana was 96.6 percent of the drugs recovered, by weight.

These “specialized” SCORPION-style units were given “wide discretion” in their “frequent contact with the public.”

DoJ investigators wrote that they “heard from officers, prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges, community members, and other advocates that the SCORPION Unit persistently mistreated people.” As a whole, MPD officers

... regularly violate the rights of the people they are sworn to serve. Our investigation found that officers use force to punish and retaliate against people who do not immediately do as they say. They rapidly escalate encounters, including traffic stops, and use excessive force even when people are already handcuffed or restrained. They resort to intimidation and threats. They have put themselves and others in harm’s way—officers have unlawfully fired at moving cars and accidentally pepper sprayed and fired Tasers at each other.

Furthermore, “There is little supervision of specialized units or patrol officers, and officers rarely face consequences when they exceed their authority.” The report documented several incidents of police assaulting residents for telling police to “solve crime” or for not immediately complying with officers’ demands.

The DoJ found that MPD’s Canine Unit “trains dogs to bite suspects immediately after they locate them and to hold the bite until a handler directs them to release.” In one example, a dog ravaged a 17-year-old’s arm for “at least 30 seconds as he begged officers to release the dog; the teenager was later taken to a children’s hospital for treatment.”

In addition to siccing dogs on children, the DoJ found that MPD’s Crisis Intervention Team (CIT), created to respond to behavioral and mental health issues, routinely used force against people that is “both unreasonable and discriminatory.” In a random sample of “less-lethal” use of force incidents, the DoJ found that nearly one-third involved people who “appeared to be experiencing behavioral health crisis, and officers used unreasonable force in a significant portion of those incidents. In other incidents, officers mocked or demeaned people with disabilities, or acted on harmful stereotypes. In many of these incidents, officers knew the person had a disability.”

In one incident, a CIT officer threatened to break the arm of a compliant 8-year-old boy and then threatened to tase him with “50,000 volts.”

In a press conference Thursday, city officials in Memphis largely rejected the report’s findings and refused to enter into a consent decree with the federal government. Democratic Mayor Paul Young declared, “We believe we can make more effective and meaningful change by working together with community input and independent national experts than with a bureaucratic, costly and complicated federal government consent decree.”

Several media outlets, including AP and *Al Jazeera*, reported that Memphis City Attorney Tannera Gibson sent a letter to the DoJ stating that the city was rejecting any potential reforms within the police department, with Gibson suggesting the investigation was “rushed” since it “only took 17 months to complete, compared to an average of 2-3 years in almost every other instance.”

It has been over 10 years since major nationwide protests broke out following the police murder of 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. From the end of Obama’s term, through Trump and now Biden, police have continued to kill over 1,000 people every year. Data from MappingPoliceViolence.org shows police killings have increased every year since 2019.

Under conditions of an expanding global war, genocide in Gaza, the breakdown in democratic forms of rule and the return to power of the fascistic Trump, the Democratic Party is shedding any pretense that it will fight to “reform” the police. As part of seeking an accommodation with Trump, the Democrats are already proposing a further clampdown on expressions of opposition to genocide on college campuses under the guise of combating “antisemitism.”

In order to carry out their global war agenda, both capitalist parties defend and uphold police murder and oppression as a necessary means to maintain their outmoded social order and economic system. Only the working class, united with a political understanding that the struggle to defend democratic rights requires an end to capitalism, can reorganize society on an egalitarian basis and end the source of police violence.



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