

New Orleans Police Department rocked by scandals

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The New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) again finds itself at the center of a whirlwind of scandals. On March 17, a federal inquiry conducted by the Department of Justice released a report on the NOPD detailing massive, systemic failures throughout the entire organization.

Last week three NOPD police officers, convicted in December on charges related to the shooting of an unarmed man during Hurricane Katrina, were sentenced by US District Judge Lance Africk.

In a widely publicized trial, two of the former officers, David Warren and Gregory McRae, were convicted of the murder and subsequent burning of New Orleanian Henry Glover, and officer Travis McCabe was convicted of writing a false report on the incident. Warren and McRae have been sentenced to 25 and 17 years respectively, while McCabe's sentence has been postponed while he seeks a new trial. Two other police officers, Dwayne Scheurmann and Robert Italiano, were cleared of all charges.

Henry Glover had driven to a local strip mall with a friend in order to scavenge for food, water and fuel during the period of chaos immediately following the disaster. Warren, who was stationed at the strip mall in order to protect business interests, fired a shot through Glover's chest with a non-issue assault rifle. Warren's partner, Linda Howard, testified that both men were unarmed.

A passerby rushed Glover to a nearby makeshift police compound located at a school. Officers immediately declared he was a "looter," confiscated his car, detained and beat him. Glover succumbed to his wounds. Gregory McRae then drove the car to a nearby levee, where he set the car on fire with Glover's body still inside. Witnesses alleged that McRae was laughing as he set the car ablaze. (See "New Orleans police

convicted in post-Katrina killing")

The NOPD accepted the falsified reports on the matter, and considered the case closed. The incident went unreported for four years until investigative journalism web site ProPublica, together with the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, ran a series of articles under the heading "Law and Disorder," in which they detailed the NOPD's brutal misconduct in the immediate aftermath of the flood. These articles, taken together, demonstrate with absolute clarity that unrestrained violence by the police was not the exception, but the rule.

Moreover, the most recent report conducted by the Department of Justice demonstrates that the NOPD has not changed in any fundamental respect since Katrina. The report found that the department "engages in patterns of misconduct that violate the Constitution and federal law," and that "NOPD practices and deficiencies cause or contribute to these patterns of misconduct."

The findings include:

- Intentional mishandling of investigations into shootings by officers. "For a time," the report explains, "NOPD had a practice of temporarily assigning officers who had been involved in officer-involved shootings to the Homicide Division, and then automatically deeming the statements officers provided to homicide investigators to be 'compelled,' effectively immunizing the use of these statements in any subsequent criminal investigation or prosecution." Furthermore, the report details "incidents where investigative missteps could not be explained by deficient training," effectively admitting that the department as a whole went out of its way to falsify and sabotage investigations into police brutality.

- Discriminatory policing, a practice with which the

city's population has long been acquainted, was confirmed yet again by an official inquiry. The report notes that in 2009 the NOPD arrested 500 black males under the age of 17, compared to eight white males of the same age group, a discrepancy that the report timidly admits "cannot plausibly be attributed entirely to the underlying rates at which these youth commit crimes."

- A failure to adequately investigate sexual assault and domestic violence.

- Effective discrimination against linguistic minority groups. The entire department "relies primarily upon just two officers, one fluent in Spanish and one fluent in Vietnamese, to assist on calls for service and investigations throughout the Department, in addition to performing their regular duties." This is to say that the entirety of the sizable Latino and Vietnamese populations must rely on one officer each to address their issues. Many recent Central American immigrants, often forced into construction work and informal labor, have complained of frequent robbery and extortion. Among their complaints, more importantly, was a complete lack of response by the NOPD.

- Criticism of the practice of officers working paid detail after hours in order to supplement their inadequate salaries. Some 70 percent of NOPD officers work paid detail, a system that the report notes "facilitates abuse and corruption by NOPD officers." The report also notes that this system also contributes to inequitable policing along socioeconomic lines, as well as officer fatigue.

The last point was given special attention by the investigators. Described as an "aorta of corruption," the report explained: "With poor documentation, no restrictions on officers soliciting work, and officers being allowed to negotiate their own compensation, it is easy for officers to extort businesses or individuals." One business was allegedly told "You f*** with me and you will never see a police car again." As if to drive the point home, on April 2, scarcely two weeks after the report was released, a captain in the NOPD was found guilty of attempting to defraud energy giant Entergy in a kickback scheme involving a private security contract with the firm.

The report by the Department of Justice is the most recent of a series of such documents issued over a span

of 20 years. A report by the Louisiana National Guard in 1994 discussed equally sordid dealings within the department and, like the report released this March, was reported by the local press as a "blueprint" for improving the force. Three other reports over the preceding three years resulted in no major overhaul—despite the absurd claims of the authors of the 1994 report that the situation could be turned around "in the next 12 months or so."

In response to the report, city leaders vacillated between public contrition and outright lying. In response to the report's findings on racial profiling, New Orleans mayor Mitch Landrieu said simply, "Well, they [the city's black residents] were right." He followed this inane and insincere comment with condescension: "If I were a member of the African-American community, I would be elated that they spoke loudly and that we listened, and that we not only listened, we did something about it."

Meanwhile, having admitted "nothing in that report was a surprise," police superintendent Ronal Serpas made the impossible claim that he had already implemented sweeping reforms that addressed many of the same issues raised by the report, despite the fact that the entirety of the 10 months covered by the report occurred during his tenure.



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