

Report on Cleveland exposes national epidemic of police killings and abuse

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Amidst growing anger over the reign of police violence and killings throughout the United States, a new report extensively documents the routine criminal activity of one police department in northern Ohio.

The report, stemming from a joint investigation by the Department of Justice (DOJ) Civil Rights Division and the United States Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Ohio, finds that the Cleveland Department of Police (CDP) regularly employs unnecessary and lethal force against suspects and innocent civilians.

The investigation into the CDP was released only days after the decision not to indict the police officer who choked Staten Island resident Eric Garner to death in July, and days after a similar decision involving the officer who shot and killed unarmed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. On Thursday night, and again on Friday, protesters gathered in many US cities to denounce these actions.

The report also comes only two weeks after a Cleveland police officer shot and killed 12-year-old Tamir Rice, who was playing with a toy gun at the time.

The Obama administration is seeking to contain popular anger over these and many other police killings, and the new Justice Department report is part of this process. The report advances a number of paltry "reforms," such as a new monitoring body and different training courses that would "make CDP more effective" and "heal the rift" between the CDP and local communities.

No criminal charges are proposed. Instead, the authors urge the CDP to carry out a "cultural shift," away from an "us-against-them mentality" and toward "community oriented policing principles."

The report nonetheless documents with striking

openness numerous instances of abuse and killings committed by CDP officers.

The CDP engages in "a pattern or practice of the use of excessive force in violation of the Fourth Amendment of the United States Constitution" such as "unnecessary and excessive use of deadly force, including shootings and head strikes with impact weapons" and "unnecessary, excessive or retaliatory use of less lethal force including tasers, chemical spray and fists," according to the report.

The use of unnecessary and lethal force "is neither isolated, nor sporadic," the report states.

CDP officers view themselves as part of "an occupying force." One police district station was found with a mock sign to suggest that the facility is similar to a military outpost (identifying it as a "forward operating base").

The report gives details of 16 examples of unnecessary use of force by CDP personnel, including:

- CDP officers used a Taser against a deaf man who was threatening suicide yet who "posed minimal risk to officers and may not have understood officers' commands"
- A CDP officer used a Taser against a man who was having seizures and was strapped to a gurney
- CDP officers fired 137 rounds into a vehicle after a car chase, killing two unarmed individuals inside
- A CDP officer choked a woman after handcuffing her to a piece of furniture
- CDP officers severely beat a man after approaching him on suspicion of public urination and discovering that he was carrying a kitchen knife

Cleveland police officers frequently employ force "as punishment for the person's earlier verbal or physical resistance to an officer's command" that is "not based on a current threat posed by the person," the report

states.

Officers use “excessive force against persons who are mentally ill or in crisis, including in cases where the officers were called exclusively for a welfare check.” CDP officers frequently take action to escalate rather than de-escalate situations, actively creating conditions to justify use of force, and frequently discharge their weapons “in a manner and in circumstances that place innocent bystanders in danger.”

In addition to constantly using extreme levels of force, the report documents ways in which the police trample on the constitutional rights of the population.

The CDP frequently carries out arrests of individuals “on suspicion of having committed a crime, with no articulation or an inadequate articulation in the CDP’s own records of the basis for the officer’s suspicion,” the report found.

Officers regularly submit reports featuring “canned or boilerplate” language to justify their use of unnecessary violence and other tactics that violate the constitutional rights of Cleveland residents, and the intentionally pro forma reports are accepted as sufficient by supervising officers.

These abuses are carried out with complete impunity, the DOJ investigators found. The CDP has no effective mechanisms in place for holding officers accountable for illegal use of force. On the contrary, the CDP chain of command “endorses” and covers up for excessive use of force, and fails to “objectively investigate use of force incidents.”

CDP does not conduct investigations into the vast majority of deadly force incidents involving its officers. The last CDP internal investigation into a potentially illegal use of deadly force was carried out more than two years ago, in 2012.

While the report is focused on the actions of the police in Cleveland, Ohio, they could just as easily be applied to countless other police departments. Harassment and abuse is a constant feature of life for residents of all races in many impoverished cities and neighborhoods throughout the country.

The political establishment, including the Obama administration, is a willing and active participant in this process. Police forces have been built up systematically, and armed with the most advanced military equipment in programs that were endorsed by the Obama administration earlier this week.

The report gives a partial portrait of a policing system that operates above the law and with complete contempt for basic democratic rights. It is not an exception, but rather reveals the essence of the state apparatus as a whole, developed by the ruling class for the purpose of defending massive levels of social inequality and suppressing growing social unrest.



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