

Justice Department report documents criminal abuse by Ferguson police

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On Wednesday, the United States Department of Justice released a report documenting a “pattern” of “unlawful conduct within the Ferguson Police Department.” The report states that police in the St. Louis suburb unlawfully arrest, beat and taser residents, and that the city’s courts engaged in practices that have been likened to the operation of a “debtor’s prison.”

The Justice Department released the report simultaneously with its announcement that it would not bring federal charges against Darren Wilson, the Ferguson police officer who killed unarmed teenager Michael Brown last August, triggering mass protests that were met with a massive crackdown by police and the National Guard.

The release of the report documenting abuses by the Ferguson Police Department was calculated to provide political cover for the decision not to charge Wilson. It was intended to give the administration’s political apologists, particularly among the proponents of racial and identity politics, an opportunity to claim that the White House was cracking down on police abuse.

While the report focused on the city of Ferguson, the types of illegal and abusive practices it documents take place on a daily basis in cities throughout the country.

The report found that the Ferguson Police Department “engages in a pattern of excessive force in violation of the Fourth Amendment,” and that these cases often “result from stops or arrests that have no basis in law. Others are punitive and retaliatory.”

It adds that “people are punished for talking back to officers, recording public police activities, and lawfully protesting perceived injustices.” The report notes that Ferguson Police “frequently detain people without reasonable suspicion and arrest people without probable cause.”

It likewise found that Ferguson cops used

unjustifiably violent methods “when interacting with more vulnerable populations, such as people with mental health conditions or intellectual disabilities and juvenile students.”

The report noted that in September 2011, Ferguson police killed a mentally-ill man by tasing him three times. In another example of the department’s systematic brutality, police sicced a dog on a fourteen-year-old boy, then “struck him while he was on the ground, one of them putting a boot on the side of his head. He recalled the officers laughing about the incident afterward.”

In another incident noted by the report, an officer arbitrarily stopped a man in a park, then proceeded to point a gun at his head, arrest him, and then charge him with eight different trumped-up violations, including “making a false declaration” by giving his nickname (Mike) instead of the name on his license (Michael).

The report declares that “Ferguson has allowed its focus on revenue generation to fundamentally compromise the role of Ferguson’s municipal court,” leading the court to issue “over 9,000 [arrest] warrants on cases stemming in large part from minor violations such as parking infractions, traffic tickets, or housing code violations.”

It adds that these “warrants are primarily issued to coerce payment,” with one judge from a neighboring municipality comparing these practices to “a debtor’s prison.”

Those charged with infractions receive often incorrect court dates and shoddy information on how much they owe or when they owe it. Even for basic traffic violations, those who miss a payment or court appearance are often sent to jail, and the courts often impose unjustifiably large bail amounts.

These practices “impose a particular hardship upon

Ferguson’s most vulnerable residents, especially upon those living in or near poverty. Minor offenses can generate crippling debts, result in jail time because of an inability to pay, and result in the loss of a driver’s license, employment, or housing.”

The report noted the case of one woman who received two parking tickets for a single violation in 2007 that totaled \$151. It added that, “over seven years later, she still owed Ferguson \$541—after already paying \$550 in fines and fees, having multiple arrest warrants issued against her, and being arrested and jailed on several occasions.”

The report further alleges that Ferguson cops target African Americans for abuse, brutality, and arbitrary arrest. While only comprising 67 percent of the total population in Ferguson, African Americans were the targets of 93 percent of arrests by Ferguson police officers from 2012 to 2014.

Further, African Americans were over twice as likely as whites to be searched during vehicle stops, while they were found in possession of contraband 26 percent less often than white drivers. African Americans were almost exclusively the target of certain highly subjective violations, including 95 percent of “manner of walking in roadway” charges, 94 percent of “failure to comply” charges, and 92 percent of “peace disturbance” charges.

In addition to such incidents, the report noted that a series of emails sent by police and court officials displayed blatant racism. These included a November 2008 email that wrote that President Barack Obama is not likely to remain President for long, because “what black man holds a steady job for four years.” In another, an officer wrote that African American women should use abortion to control crime.

The authors of the report note that their “investigation has not revealed any indication that any officer or court clerk engaged in these communications was ever disciplined.” The report notes that senior city officials, including those tasked with determining what changes will be made based on the Justice Department report, were among the recipients of these racist emails.

Despite documenting numerous significant violations of residents’ most fundamental constitutional rights, the report does not call for any disciplinary actions, much less criminal prosecutions against the officers or officials responsible. In this way, the report entirely

parallels the decision not to bring charges against Wilson, providing a clear signal that the police will continue to be allowed to brutalize, abuse, and kill workers and youth with impunity.



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