

Calls for systemic change of U.S. policing follow report on Minneapolis police department

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Minneapolis, June 19 (RHC)-- Racial justice defenders say that the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) probe of the Minneapolis Police Department—which detailed a pattern of excessive violence, racism, and civil rights violations—underscores the need for deep systemic transformation of U.S. policing.

The DOJ's 89-page report—the result of an investigation launched in the wake of the May 2020 murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin—found that, as many community members have said for decades, the MPD and Minnesota's largest city "engage in a pattern or practice of conduct in violation of the U.S. Constitution and federal law."

"Our investigation showed that MPD officers routinely use excessive force, often when no force is necessary. We found that MPD officers often use unreasonable force (including deadly force) to obtain immediate compliance with orders, often forgoing meaningful de-escalation tactics and instead using force to subdue people," the report states. "MPD's pattern or practice of using excessive force violates the law."

The DOJ probe found that MPD:

Uses excessive force, including unjustified deadly force and unreasonable use of Tasers;
Unlawfully discriminates against Black people and Native American people in its enforcement activities, including the use of force following stops;

Violates the rights of people engaged in protected speech; and... Along with the city, discriminates against people with behavioral health disabilities when responding to calls for assistance.

"We also found persistent deficiencies in MPD's accountability systems, training, supervision, and officer wellness programs, which contribute to the violations of the Constitution and federal law," the report states.

Responding to the investigation, Black Lives Matter tweeted: "Reform isn't what we need! 'Reform' means more money for the killer cop industry that will never erase its origins out of slave patrols. Defund the police. Then we abolish."

Award-winning filmmaker and Twin Cities community artist D.A. Bullock lamented "the absolute folly of dedicating all our resources toward carceral systems that do not work."

"[You] don't fund or bolster the executioner to prevent the murder," he argued on Twitter.

John Thompson, a former Democratic Minnesota state lawmaker from St. Paul, said at a community press conference after the report's release that "we've been here before. Everything they've told you... we've said it before out of our own mouths, only to be ridiculed and called race-baiters."

"I can only speak as a Black man, because I've been a Black man my whole life. Black men died at the hands of the Minneapolis Police Department... We're talking about Black men dying," added Thompson, who was friends with Philado Castile, a Black man shot dead in his car in 2017 by an officer in the Minneapolis suburb of Falcon Heights.

"We steady keep pumping money into public safety but the public is not safe," he contended.

The DOJ probe found that between 2020 and 2022 MPD officers stopped Black people at 7.8 times the rate of white people, and Indigenous people 10 times as often as whites, with the disparity in searches even worse.

"MPD searches people during stops involving Black people at 12.8 times the per capita rate at which it searches people during stops involving white people. MPD searches people during stops involving Native Americans at 19.7 times the rate for white people," the report notes.

Furthermore, the report highlights a pattern of "needlessly harsh treatment of youth," including an incident in which "an MPD officer drew his gun and arrested an unarmed Black teen for allegedly taking a \$5 burrito without paying," pinning the child to the hood of a car and prompting witnesses to call 911 "to report the teen was being accosted by a 'wacko who has a gun.'"

A section of the DOJ report on MPD's illegal attacks on protesters and journalists states:

MPD officers regularly retaliate against members of the press—particularly by using force. For example... on May 30, 2020, officers encountered journalists who were sheltering at a gas station. An officer...

approached a journalist who was filming, holding up his press credential, and shouting, "I'm press!" The officer forcefully pushed the journalist's head to the pavement. As he lay on the ground, the journalist held up his press credential. In response, an MPD sergeant pepper sprayed him directly in his face, then walked away.

The DOJ said Minneapolis and the MPD have agreed "in principle" to a consent decree, a plan for reform enforced by a federal court.

"George Floyd's death had an irrevocable impact on his family, on the Minneapolis community, on our country, and on the world," U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland said in a statement. "The patterns and practices of conduct the Justice Department observed during our investigation are deeply disturbing. They erode the community's trust in law enforcement. And they made what happened to George Floyd possible."

"Today, we have completed our investigation, but this is only the first step," Garland added. "We will continue to work with the city and the MPD toward ensuring that MPD officers have the support and resources they need to do their jobs effectively and lawfully as we work together toward meaningful and durable reform."

The report contains 28 recommendations in eight categories: use of force, identifying and reducing racial disparities, protecting First Amendment rights, responding to people with behavioral health issues, accountability, transparency, training, and wellness.

The ACLU of Minnesota -- which has filed three lawsuits over the unconstitutional MPD practices referenced in the DOJ report -- said it hopes the city will agree to include all of DOJ's recommendations in the forthcoming consent decree.

"The findings of the DOJ's investigation into the Minneapolis Police Department are troubling, and sadly not surprising," ACLU of Minnesota executive director Deepinder Mayell said in a statement. "Minneapolis residents—especially Black and Indigenous people, and people with behavioral health disabilities—have long been victim to excessive force and discriminatory treatment at the hands of MPD."

"Police have treated the people and the First Amendment with blatant disrespect by assaulting protesters and journalists," Mayell added. "We hope the coming consent decree finally helps create a community where all people are safe, and police follow the law."

U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-Minn.) said in a statement that "this is a dark day for our city." "These findings are shocking, but sadly, not surprising," Omar continued. "What's worse, the report finds that many of the violations—such as the widespread failure to report race and gender in stops— increased after George Floyd's murder in 2020."

"As a Black woman living in Minneapolis, I have experienced some of these violations firsthand," she said. "What's worse, the report finds that many of the violations—such as the widespread failure to report race and gender in stops— increased after George Floyd's murder in 2020."

Omar argued that "we must demand a public safety system built on data and trust, not fear and racism. We must recognize that we cannot prosecute and incarcerate our way to sustainable public safety, that building that trust requires that we address the system that allows racial discrimination—from the disproportionate arrest and incarceration rates Black and Brown people face, to the marijuana laws that criminalize Black and Brown people."

"We need to act at the federal level, including by passing my Amir Locke End Deadly No Knock Warrants Act, my package of bills making police violence against protesters a federal crime (among other provisions), and the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act," the congresswoman added. "And most of all,

we must build a police force that is well-trained, held accountable by its leadership, and follows the highest standards of ethics and conduct."

In response to the DOJ report, Minneapolis Police Chief Brian O'Hara vowed that "we will change the narrative around policing in this city. Out of the darkness and trauma that our residents and our police officers have experienced over the last three years, we will emerge as a beacon of light for the rest of the world."

Civil rights attorneys Benjamin Crump, Antonio Romanucci, and Jeff Storms—members of George Floyd's legal team who now represent relatives of Amir Locke, a Black man shot dead by MPD officers executing a February 2022 "no-knock" warrant for another man—released a statement that said in part:

Unfortunately, our legal team remains skeptical about Minneapolis' commitment to change and accountability. We are deeply concerned that while city leaders appear to be cooperating with the DOJ directives to create change, the city is doing the opposite, and vigorously defending the conduct of the officers who shot and killed Amir Locke.

"Despite the city's public face of wanting reform to stop the needless deaths of young Brown and Black Minneapolis residents, the city continues to mount aggressive defenses on behalf of the officers and police department they agree requires federal consent reforms," the trio added. "This continued refusal to police from within is a textbook example of why the federal government must police the Minneapolis police."

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