
Investigation of the Trenton Police Department
U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division
and the
U.S. Attorney's Office, District of New Jersey
November 21, 2024

On a May afternoon in 2022, a Black woman sat in her parked car on a Trenton street and spoke to her friend, a Black man who was standing in the street, through the car window. Three Trenton Police Department (TPD) officers assigned to a unit that focused on drug and gun crimes noticed the man reaching into his satchel and concluded that the woman was buying drugs. The officers drove the wrong way down the one-way street toward the parked car. The man ran off and two of the officers chased him. One officer stayed behind, opened the car door, and grabbed the woman by the wrist. As the woman asked, "What is going on? Why are you arresting me?", the officer handcuffed her and pulled her by the handcuffs. The woman protested that the officer was hurting her. "Get the fuck out of the car or you're going to get pepper sprayed," the officer said. The police found no drugs after searching the woman and her car. The other officers returned to find the woman handcuffed in the back of the police car, and they asked the arresting officer why he arrested her. "I don't know," the officer replied.

Similar scenes have played out repeatedly on Trenton's streets. With inadequate supervision and little training on the legal rules and well-accepted police procedures that should constrain their conduct, Trenton police officers engage in a pattern or practice of violating those rules.

FINDINGS

The Department of Justice has reasonable cause to believe that the City of Trenton and the Trenton Police Department engage in a pattern or practice of misconduct that deprives people of their rights under the Fourth Amendment:

- TPD uses excessive force, including using unreasonable forms of physical force and pepper spray.
- TPD unlawfully stops, searches, and arrests people during pedestrian and traffic stops.

On October 17, 2023, the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice and the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of New Jersey opened a pattern or practice investigation into the City of Trenton and the Trenton Police Department.

We conducted dozens of interviews and reviewed TPD's data on its enforcement activities, its use of force, and its investigations into officer misconduct, along with hundreds of incidents. We find that Trenton police officers, particularly those in specialized enforcement units, conduct illegal pedestrian stops and searches, and unlawfully prolong traffic stops. They arrest people without a legal basis. They are quick to escalate situations through their aggressive tactics and refusal to answer people's legitimate questions. Officers use unreasonable force against people who are not threatening them, including spraying them with pepper spray.

Trenton has paid out more than \$7 million since 2021 to resolve lawsuits stemming from accusations of officer misconduct. Some Trentonians have lost faith in their police department due to these continued failures. Members of the public have told us they avoid any interaction with the police because they fear the police will violate their rights or will make a bad situation worse. This makes the community less safe and is a direct consequence of TPD's pattern or practice of constitutional violations.

After we opened our investigation, TPD disbanded two street enforcement units. We found that these units had engaged in constitutional violations, but disbanding the units was not sufficient to end TPD's pattern or practice of unconstitutional policing. The violations we found were not limited to the street enforcement units. Additionally, TPD reassigned many of the officers to patrol and some others to a new enforcement unit, where they continue to have daily opportunities to violate the Constitution. Addressing the pattern or practice of violations we identified requires reforms that go beyond restructuring units.

The City and TPD have cooperated fully in our investigation, and both City and TPD officials have acknowledged that there are problems with policing in Trenton and have already begun making changes. While TPD's policies generally follow standards set by the New Jersey attorney general, we found that officers do not adhere to these mandatory requirements. Reform will require ensuring that TPD has procedures to enforce these standards and measure compliance.

We look forward to continuing to work collaboratively with the City and the police department to help officers protect the public while respecting people's rights.