

# DOJ finds abuses by Miss. police department

## Evidence of excessive force, discrimination

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REUTERS

WASHINGTON – The U.S. Justice Department said on Thursday it found a series of civil rights violations by a small-town Mississippi police department, accusing officers of routinely using excessive force and arresting people who owed fines for minor traffic offenses.

The department’s Civil Rights Division reported finding that Black people in Lexington, Mississippi, were disproportionately targeted by an aggressive police enforcement strategy and that actions by police were driven in part by “intentional discrimination.”

The investigation is unusual in that it focused on a police department with about 10 officers in a city of just 1,600 people.

“Small and mid-sized police departments must not be allowed to violate people’s civil rights with impunity,” Kristen Clarke, the head of the Civil Rights Division, told reporters.

“Lexington is a small, rural community, but its police department has had a heavy hand in people’s lives, wreaking havoc through use of excessive force, discriminatory policing, retaliation and more.”

Justice Department officials said the police department and town of Lexington cooperated and pledged to implement reforms. A town representative declined to comment to Reuters.

The probe began last year after the department’s former chief, Sam Dobbins, was fired when a recording surfaced of him using a racial slur while bragging about shooting someone 119 times, according to the Justice Department report. Dobbins previously denied using the slur, according to local media reports.

The Justice Department has the authority to conduct what are known as pattern-or-practice investigations to determine if local or state police are routinely violating people’s rights under the U.S. Constitution. Investigations were curtailed under Republican President Donald Trump’s administration, but under Democratic President



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Joe Biden, the department has announced 11 such probes of law enforcement agencies.

Many of those probes are still ongoing, leaving them susceptible to being shut down or slowed if Trump wins the Nov. 5 election. Two cities – Minneapolis and Louisville, Kentucky – have said they will submit to federal oversight following high-profile police killings of Black people in those cities.

The Lexington, Mississippi, report focuses on what Clarke called a “crude policing-for-profit scheme” in which the police department’s budget depends on revenue it raises through enforcement.

Police routinely arrest people for minor offenses such as loitering and traffic offenses and hold people with outstanding fines in jail until they pay, the department said.

One man spent 12 days in jail for stealing packets of sugar, the report found.

The police department’s revenue through fines and fees grew by a factor of seven in recent years while outstanding debt to the department rose to \$1.7 million, the Justice Department found.

The report also found that Lexington police retaliate against people who criticize their actions and arrest people for using profanity in violation of their free speech rights.

In one instance, one officer arresting someone for using profanity used the same expletive during the arrest, according to the report.