



February 14, 2023

The Honorable Merrick B. Garland
Attorney General U.S. Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20530-0001

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, D.C. 20590

Re: UPDATED: 153 Civil and Human Rights Organizations Sign-on Letter demanding meeting with Department of Justice and Department of Transportation – The Death of Tyre Nichols at the hands of Memphis Police Officers on January 10, 2023

Dear Attorney General Garland and Secretary Buttigieg:

The **151 civil and human rights organizations** below write to express outrage at the tragic death of Tyre Nichols, a young Black man killed in January 2023 by police officers in Memphis, Tennessee, and to demand action by federal, state and local public officials to address the law enforcement policies and practices that have given rise to such tragedies across the nation.

What happened to Tyre Nichols?

Mr. Nichols was a 29 year old Black man, son of a loving mother, RowVaughn Wells, whose name was tattooed on his arm; and father of a four-year-old son. A worker on the second shift at FedEx, Nichols was stopped as he drove to his home on the night of January 7th by members of the Memphis police Department “SCORPION Unit,” who pepper sprayed and then beat him, “like a human piñata,” for three long minutes. Taken unconscious to a local hospital, he remained on life-support for three days until he was pronounced dead. The initial report from Memphis police authorities said he had been stopped for a traffic violation. They said he had tried to run away.

Traffic enforcement by police too often results in death

Traffic stops are the #1 reason why people come in contact with police officers. Of the 1,176 people killed by police in 2022, 32 percent were said to have been fleeing apprehension. Eight percent had been stopped for a traffic violation.¹ Race also played a factor. Black drivers make up 28 percent of those killed by police in traffic stops, though they comprise just 13 percent of the U.S. population.²

Police officers are encouraged to make “pretextual” traffic stops for minor infractions such as a broken tail light or expired license tags — crimes of poverty — in order to look for evidence of separate and unrelated illegal behavior. Pretextual stops are used to justify searches of drivers, passengers and cars for drugs and weapons without probable cause, a violation of the 4th Amendment. Studies have shown that Black and Brown drivers are more likely to be stopped than White drivers, though Whites are more likely to be found with illegal contraband.³

Two massive Federal agencies, the Department of Justice and the Department of Transportation, provide billions of tax dollars to incentivize and promote traffic stops as both a crime-control and a traffic safety strategy. But where is the evidence that traffic stops make our communities safer? Patrick Lyoya, Daunte Wright, Sandra Bland, Philando Castile, now Tyre Nichols... the numbers mount and they call for a total rethinking of the role of police in traffic enforcement.

The SCORPION Unit

The “Street Crimes Operation to Restore Peace In Our Neighborhoods” SCORPION unit was created by the Memphis Police Department in November 2021 to address violent crime. 40 officers, organized in four teams, were said to be targeting carjackings, assaults and homicides, flooding into “hot spots” across the city in coordination with MPD’s troubled Multi-Agency Gang Unit. Hot Spot policing, “Cops on Dots,” is popular but controversial, increasing tension between police and residents in targeted neighborhoods and opening the door to abusive actions by officers under orders to “crack down” on crime.

Jump-Out squads such as SCORPION are “specialized” violence suppression units. Typically, officers wear plainclothes or non-standard uniforms and drive unmarked vehicles. They do not respond to 911 calls, perform standard patrol duties or report to local precinct commanders. Instead, they work largely independently, executing

¹ Levin, Sam. “‘It never stops’: killings by US police reach record high in 2022.” *The Guardian*, January 6, 2023.

² _____. “US police have killed nearly 600 people in traffic stops since 2017, data shows.” *The Guardian*, April 21, 2022.

³ Lofstrum, Magnus et. Al. “Racial Disparities in Traffic Stops.” *Public Policy Institute of California: Policy Brief*, October 2022.

proactive, hyper-aggressive crime-suppression tactics that target guns, gangs or drugs, stopping or intimidating low-income, mostly Black and Brown residents.⁴

From coast to coast — from the Ramparts CRASH Unit in Los Angeles, to the Gun Trace Task Force in Baltimore and the New York City plainclothes police unit that deployed officer Daniel Pantaleo as he choked the life out of Eric Garner — such squads are rife with historic levels of corruption and brutality.⁵ Could it have come as a complete surprise to Memphians that Tyre Nichols died at the hands of the MPD SCORPION Unit?

What needs to be done?

On January 26th five members of the SCORPION Unit were indicted for 2nd Degree Murder. But beyond the prosecution of the individual officers involved lie critical issues of policy and practice that must be addressed by public officials at all levels of government if incidents like those cited above can be avoided in the future.

Here are some steps that must be taken:

- End the deployment of armed patrol officers in traffic enforcement.
- Eliminate the use of pretextual stops, terminating all Federal funding support for them.
- Require public police reports showing the location of each stop and the demographic characteristics of every driver.
- Disband the Jump-Out squads that operate to criminalize, intimidate, and too-often brutalize residents in low-income Black and Brown communities.

We request a meeting with top authorities at both the Department of Justice and the Department of Transportation.

For replies and requests for further information, please contact:

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Sincerely,
DeCarcerate Memphis

⁴ Lopez, Christy E. “Cities should get rid of their toxic crime-suppression units.” *The Washington Post*, January 31, 2023.

⁵ Balko, Radley. “Tyre Nichols Death Proves Yet Again That ‘Elite’ Police Units Are a Disaster.” *The New York Times*, January 29, 2023.

A Little Piece Of Light
ACT 4 SA
Activists With A Purpose Plus
Advancement Project
ADVANCEMENT PROJECT
Alabama Justice Initiative
Alianza for Youth Justice
All of Us or None Texas- A Project of Legal Services for Prisoners with Children
Allston Brighton Health Collaborative
Alyssa Rodriguez Center for Gender Justice
America Walks
American Association of People with Disabilities
Bend the Arc Long Island
Bend the Arc: Jewish Action
Bend the Arc: Jewish Action - Maryland
Bend the Arc: Jewish Action California
Bend the Arc: Jewish Action Memphis
Bend the Arc: Jewish Action Pittsburgh
Bend the Arc: Jewish Action South Jersey
Bend the Arc: Jewish Action Champaign Urbana
Bike East Bay
Black Leaders Across Cleveland Kinnected
Black Liberation Party
Black Lives Matter Cleveland Inc.
Black Nashville Assembly
Black Voters Matter Fund
Blacks in law Enforcement of America
BLM Louisville
Blue Future
Boston Cyclists Union
CASES
Center for Constitutional Rights
Center for Disability Rights
Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)
Center for Popular Democracy
Chainless Change`
Church of Scientology National Affairs Office
Church WORLD SERVICE
Cincinnati Black United Front
Civil Rights Corps

Clearinghouse on Women's Issues
Coalition of Labor Union Women
Colorado Justice Advocacy Network
Communities for Just Schools Fund
Companions of God
Cuyahoga County Jail Coalition
Defending Rights & Dissent
Defund the Police
Detroit Justice Center
Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund
Drug Policy Alliance
Equal Justice Society
Equal Justice USA
Equality Federation
Fair and Just Prosecution
FPWA (Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies)
Freedom BLOC
Freedom to Thrive
Georgia Reconnecting Youth INC.
Grassroots Leadership
Greater Lansing DSA
Greater Lansing Network Against War and Injustice (GLNAWI)
Heal Da Homies
HEAL Ohio
Healthy and Free Tennessee
Human Rights Watch
Imagine Black Futures
In Our Names Network
Incarcerated Nation Network
Indivisible Michigan 7
InterReligious Task Force on Central America
Just City
Justice Strategies
KCSC
LatinoJustice PRLDEF
Lawyers for Good Government (L4GG)
League Of Revolutionaries for a New America
LivableStreets Alliance
Long Island Progressive Coalition
Mass Liberation AZ

Mayers Strategic Solutions, LLC
Memphis for All
Metro DC DSA - Defund MPD Working Group
MN8
Mommieactivist and Sons
MomsRising
Mothers Against Police Brutality
Movement for Family Power
Muslim Advocates
Muslim Justice League
NAMI Huntington
National Center for Law and Economic Justice
National Conference of Black Political Scientists
National Disability Rights Network (NDRN)
National Fair Housing Alliance
National Juvenile Justice Network
National Lawyers Guild, DC Chapter
Near Futures Projects
New Deal For Youth
New Hour Li for women and children
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
NextGen America
Nollie Jenkins Family Center, Inc. (NJFC)
Nulawlab
Ohio Families Unite Against Police Brutality
Ohio Families Unite for Political Action and Change
Ohio Women's Alliance
Oregonizers
Parents Organized for Public Education
Policing and Social Justice Project
Prison Policy Initiative
Pro-Choice Ohio
Public Citizen
RAPP (Release Aging People in Prison)
Rebuilding Independence My Style
Represent Justice
Reproductive Justice Inside
Restore Oakland
SA Stands
SAFE ROADS ALLIANCE INC

Santa Ana Active Streets
Second Chance Center, Inc (Colorado)
Sovereign Bodies Institute
State Voices
State wide Organized committee
Strategies for Youth
Texas Organizing Project
The Black Police Experience
The Daniel Initiative
The Decarceration Collection
The Equitcity Racial Equity Movement
The Fannie Lou Hamer Center For Change
The Festival Center
The Gault Center
The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug dependence-Maryland Chapter
The Porchlight Collective SAP
The Real Cost of Prisons Project
The Workers Circle
Think Common
Traffic Violence Rapid Response
TransitMatters
True Story Pictures
UltraViolet
Vera Institute
Visionary V Ministries
Voices for Progress
Walk Bike Berkeley
Walking-in-Love
Women on the Rise
YJAC
Zealous

Cc:

White House Domestic Policy Council (DPC)
House of Representatives and US Senate Transportation Committees
House of Representatives and US Senate Judiciary Committees
House of Representatives and US Senate Leadership
All House of Representatives Members
All US Senate Members