# Report details abuses of Ferguson police and courts

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FERGUSON, Mo. — A Justice Department report released Wednesday accused the Ferguson Police Department and courts of unfairly targeting African-Americans, searching people without probable cause, abusing authority and routinely violating civil rights.

Now it’s up to the city to respond. Will leaders agree to make the more than two dozen changes the Justice Department recommended? Did they dispute the findings? Could the city afford to follow the recommendations? Could it afford not to? If city leaders had answers to those questions on Wednesday, they declined to say.

## "We Must Do Better"

At a brief news conference, Ferguson Mayor James Knowles read a statement, but did not take any questions. He said the city had suspended two employees and fired another for writing racially insensitive emails outlined in the report. The city also ended some court fees and hired three African-American women. “We must do better,” Knowles said, “not only as a city, but as a state and as a country.”

Ferguson Police Chief Thomas Jackson did not speak at the news conference, nor has he returned phone calls seeking comment. The report depicts his department as tolerating a culture of police brutality and using his officers to generate revenue through court fines for the city. On Tuesday, three federal Department of Justice officials went over the report with top Ferguson officials. Justice Department officials stressed that the process of reaching an agreement with Ferguson has only begun. The agency still has the option to force change by suing the city.

On Wednesday, the Justice Department announced that former Ferguson Police Officer Darren Wilson, who is white, will not face any federal charges over the shooting of an unarmed black teen. On Aug. 9, Wilson killed Michael Brown, who was 18. Brown's death created national soul-searching over police and race and led to the Justice Department report. Attorney General Eric Holder on Wednesday condemned a “pervasive, corrosive” lack of trust in the police department. He said that the Ferguson police and courts had “severely undermined the public trust," and created a “tensely charged atmosphere, where people feel under assault, under siege.”

## Police Tactics Criticized

The report discusses dozens of cases of people abused by the system. In one of those, a 32-year-old black man was sitting in a car after playing basketball. A police officer stopped him because his windows were too dark. The officer stopped him from using his phone, ordered him out of the car and asked to search his car. “When the man refused, citing his constitutional rights, the officer reportedly pointed a gun at his head, and arrested him,” the report says.

“Officers expect and demand compliance even when they lack legal authority,” the report said. Despite making up 67 percent of the population, African-Americans accounted for 85 percent of all traffic stops and received 90 percent of traffic tickets. Likewise, 93 percent of the people arrested by Ferguson police over the last two years were black.

One of the charges where blacks are cited more often than whites was “Manner of Walking,” which was issued to blacks 95 percent of the time. The report says that the consistency and magnitude of the disparities between the treatment of blacks and whites show that racism was at its root. At each point, Ferguson police "enforces the law more harshly against black people than others,” stated the report.

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## "A Collection Agency"

The investigation found seven racist emails that had circulated among police and court employees from 2008 to 2011. One of them depicted President Barack Obama as a chimpanzee. Even as recently as a month ago, officers violated people’s right to free speech, the report says. On Feb. 9, several people were peacefully protesting outside the Ferguson police station.

Video footage showed two Ferguson police vehicles abruptly accelerate from the parking lot, and an officer announce, “Everybody here’s going to jail." A man who recorded the scene was himself arrested for interfering with a police action. Officers pushed him to the ground, began handcuffing him, and told him, “Stop resisting or you’re going to get tased.” Video showed the man was neither interfering nor resisting.

Also, the report says Ferguson increasingly used its police and courts to raise money — often at the expense of those who were poor and African-American. The report said Ferguson used its police department as “a collection agency” to bring in money for the town. Not much thought was given to whether enforcement strategies promoted public safety or destroyed community trust and cooperation for no reason. Officer evaluations and promotions depended heavily on "productivity," which meant the number of tickets issued.

## Reforms Recommended

The department has recommended 26 reforms for the city’s police department and court system. Proposed police reforms include requiring a supervisor to approve any arrest on charges of failure to comply, resisting arrest, disorderly conduct and obstructing government operations. The report suggests changing the department’s policy on the use of force and training officers on techniques for de-escalating violence. Also, officers should be trained to detect racial profiling and other forms of discriminatory policing. The report also recommended involving civilians in police decision-making.

The first steps will include meetings with community members, police and city officials to agree on a list of reforms, and a court-appointed overseer would monitor progress. Officials said they were encouraged that Ferguson has already begun training for “bias-free policing” and has implemented changes in police and court policies. Justice Department officials said the proposed reforms are expensive and that police departments, including Ferguson’s, are short of cash. But “the cost of not doing this, not just monetarily, but otherwise, are pretty severe,” a Justice Department official said.