



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: 151 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 7<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 4<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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

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

<sup>2</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. “US police have killed nearly 600 people in traffic stops since 2017, data shows.” *The Guardian*, April 21, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> 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 26<sup>th</sup> five members of the SCORPION Unit were indicted for 2<sup>nd</sup> 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

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

<sup>5</sup> 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 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  
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 Equiticity 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