



Mississippi

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Dear Mississippi Federal Bureau of Investigation, Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice, State Auditor White, Director of Public Integrity Gregory, and Congressman Thompson:

The town of Lexington, MS has a population of 1,576 people and is 86.33% Black. Lexington has a poverty rate of 29.18%¹. Even though Lexington’s population is overwhelmingly Black, the police chief (now former police chief), mayor, city attorney, and judge are all white. Despite Lexington being in the poorest county in the poorest state in the country², former police chief Sam Dobbins allegedly stated he would “make a million dollars” for the city. He attempted to do this by over policing the Black community with brutality, falsifying charges, racially

¹ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/lexington-ms-population>

² <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2019/01/25/poorest-counties-in-the-us-median-household-income/38870175/>

discriminatory roadblocks, and by requiring cash bonds in excessive amounts. Furthermore, many of the cash bonds seem to have no correlating record, according to our Public Record Requests (“PRR”), and we feel there is a strong likelihood of a misappropriation of funds.

The city attorney, board of aldermen, and the mayor were all made aware of Sam Dobbins’ behavior and racist policing practices, yet none of them acted until a roughly seventeen (17) minute recording was released of Dobbins. In this recording, Dobbins bragged about killing thirteen (13) people and that he didn’t care if his officers “killed a m*ther f**ker in cold blood.” He used the words “n***er” and “f**got” when discussing Black people and members of the LGBTQ community, and boasted about personally shooting a man 119 times in the line of duty. Despite numerous complaints by the citizens of Lexington, as well as by former officers of the Lexington Police Department (LPD) stating that Dobbins often speaks and behaves this way, it took the recording being released for Dobbins to be fired. Furthermore, the Board of Aldermen voted for Dobbins to be fired in a 3/2 vote, meaning two members of the board did not vote for his termination even after the recording was released.

Former police chief Dobbins’ second in command who is also the current interim police chief, Officer Charles Henderson, has also been the focus of numerous complaints regarding police brutality in the town of Lexington. For example, we have received reports of Henderson choking a woman and holding her against the wall of the police station by her throat. He did this after she requested a refund for a fine she’d paid that the court ordered be refunded to her. We have also received information from a former LPD officer that Henderson once picked a handcuffed man up and flipped him over a table during an interrogation. There are also numerous reports that Henderson has a reputation of being violent towards women in the community. The fact that Dobbins has been fired yet Henderson is the person replacing him, causes great concern within the community and was discussed at a recent town meeting.

Below are a few of the stories that the people of Lexington have shared with our organization. For their own confidentiality and out of concern for their safety, their names are redacted. All of the intakes, PRRs, and interviews used to compile this letter were conducted within the past year, and are just a small sample of the sort of information we have received.

1. Cash Bonds:

LPD officers incarcerate people at the Holmes County Jail. When reviewing the Holmes County Jail’s log book, which keeps track of everyone who is incarcerated there, we noticed several LPD-related entries stating “cash bond” in the section where bond amounts are listed. We have received numerous allegations that LPD often arrested people and then told them they could go home that same day if they paid a large sum in cash directly to LPD. LPD refused to accept payments in any form other than cash and individuals were rarely given any form of receipt nor documentation of their payment, allegedly.

If people were unable to pay in cash, they were held at the jail until they could which, we have been told, resulted in people being held without a hearing for a significant amount of time. We have reason to believe that some, if not most, of these incidents went

undocumented. Some individuals even reported being re-arrested for “old fines” they’d already paid in cash. One such individual was told he could work his fines off by providing mechanical work on LPD’s police vehicles. He then completely worked off his fines in this manner, but was later rearrested for not paying those same fines.

We also found that the majority of the arrests recorded in the jail’s log book had no correlating arrest report, and the vast majority of arrests were either undocumented or the reports withheld despite being responsive to our PRR. For example, we observed a sample of the log book and found roughly one hundred and fifty (150) arrests by LPD. We then requested arrest reports in our PRRs, which covered the same time period as the log book sample plus an additional six months. We received a total of thirty (30) arrest reports from LPD.

For a certain duration of time, LPD would also not allow people to bond out after 5 pm on weekdays nor at all on weekends. If someone was arrested at 4:59 pm on a Friday, they were thus unable to bond out until Monday morning. Furthermore, we have received information during our interviews that this was not the city’s policy and that chief Dobbins allegedly created and enforced this practice himself. After contacting the city attorney, we learned that this was “no longer” the city’s policy, but we have credible reports that it occurred even after we received that information from the city attorney. We were unable to learn the date the policy was changed nor how long the former policy was allegedly in place from our PRR, as the city seemed to have no written record of it. Since the city has no written records regarding this matter, it is unclear exactly where the practice or policy originated from.

2. Cash Payments Going Missing:

According to a former LPD officer, cash payments, which were kept in Chief Dobbins’ office, “went missing” on several occasions. We requested documents via a PRR regarding all records tracking such cash payments. We found that these payments were either mostly undocumented, or the city did not release the entirety of their responsive records to us.

It is unclear if the Lexington Municipal Court had any knowledge that these cash payments were being made nor is it clear if the payment amounts were standardized. For example, we have received reports that the fine/bond amounts vary for the exact same charge and that the police chief personally set the amount after each arrest. This often resulted in people being held for several days before being informed by the chief of the amount they would need to pay, which was often excessive for mere misdemeanors. Also, as previously stated, these excessive fines were then paid in cash, sometimes directly to the police chief. Our reports indicate the cash payments were then stored in a book in Chief Dobbins’ office.

3. Asking Officers to Fabricate Police Reports:

We have received reports from a former LPD officer that Dobbins told that officer to add charges against individuals that amounted to fabricating police reports. During one such incident, Dobbins told her to add charges for “stealing” and “public drunkenness” against

someone with intellectual disabilities who had not stolen nor was intoxicated. Rather, the intellectually disabled man was allegedly trespassing. She believes the chief adds charges to get more money from bonds/fines.

We have also received numerous allegations stating that Dobbins and his officers would often add charges of “resisting arrest” and/or “failure to comply” frequently even when the individuals were not resisting nor failing to comply. In the Holmes County log book, we noticed some entries stating charges of resisting arrest by LPD, but no other charges were listed that would indicate why the person was even being arrested to begin with.

Furthermore, in the 17 (seventeen) minute recording of Dobbins, he stated he would “take the heat” for his officers. Dobbins stated he didn’t “give a f*ck if [they] killed a mother f*cker in cold blood” and that he would “articulate” to “fix the f*cking problem” and that he’s the “only man in the business [...] smart enough to do it.”

4. Uncertified/ Untrained Officers:

We have received various reports that many officers working for LPD are/were untrained and/or uncertified. When we requested documentation through a PRR asking what, if any, restrictions were placed on untrained/uncertified officers, we were told there were no responsive documents. Additionally, we’ve received reports of untrained/uncertified officers being given the same law-enforcement responsibilities as those that were trained/certified.

Alarmingly, we have also received reports that Chief Dobbins himself remained uncertified for over a year during his time as chief. We were told the Board of Aldermen then made him attend a multi-week program to obtain certification, but that he returned early from that program and claimed he had received the certification. We were unable to confirm what, if any, certifications and trainings LPD officers received through our PRR, as the only document produced merely stated the number of hours officers allegedly received in training annually. It did not provide any information on what/when that training was nor what officers were certified in.

5. Police Brutality:

We received reports that the Holmes County Jail received numerous individuals arrested by LPD that were sick and/or injured. Despite these individuals still being the responsibility of LPD, LPD refused to take them to receive medical treatment. According to the Holmes County Sherriff, this led to the Holmes County Jail refusing to accept sick/injured arrestees from LPD.

We received one such allegation that a man was “pistol whipped” by LPD in the face and required medical care. LPD first refused to take him to receive such care but eventually dropped the individual off outside of a hospital. They did not escort the individual inside, we were told.

In another such instance, LPD selectively enforced a fireworks ordinance against one Black family on New Year’s Eve. This was despite the fact that many of their neighbors

were also shooting fireworks. When their selective enforcement of the ordinance was pointed out by a member of the family, LPD responded by tasing him and then arresting both him and his brother. We have strong reason to believe that the taser use report written by LPD for this incident was falsified. Then, four months later, the brothers discussed their arrests by LPD at a town hall meeting concerning police misconduct in Lexington. That same night, the brothers were re-arrested for the same charges that occurred on New Year's Eve. The brothers believe their re-arrests were in retaliation for speaking out at the town hall.

Additionally, according to a former LPD officer, the officer observed Dobbins kicking someone in the head multiple times during an arrest. The ex-officer claims there was body cam footage of this, but the footage was "lost," although they stated the city attorney possessed a copy. According to another former LPD officer, Dobbins once "covered up the cameras during an interrogation, but you could still hear the man being beaten." That same former officer stated that Dobbins often "beat people for no reason" and then would "falsely charge them with resisting arrest."

6. Discriminatory Roadblocks:

When reviewing the log book from the Holmes County Jail, we discovered roughly one hundred and fifty (150) arrests by LPD from 6/29/21 to 5/17/22. Of these arrests, only five (5) were of white people. The reason for this became evident throughout the course of our investigation.

We received a significant number of reports that, at one point, LPD conducted between five to six roadblocks a week. The location of the roadblocks indicated a disturbing trend of racial targeting. For example, when the local predominantly Black high school held school events, LPD would conduct roadblocks around the school. When the predominantly white high school held events, LPD would merely direct traffic to assist with the event, and no roadblocks were held. Other common areas roadblocks were held were located in parts of town that were populated by predominantly Black residents.

Furthermore, we have received numerous reports that, when white drivers went through the roadblocks and didn't have their driver's licenses and/or proof of insurance, LPD let them go with warnings. If a Black driver went through the roadblocks and didn't have their driver's license and/or proof of insurance they were immediately arrested, their cars would be towed (even in the event that another driver with proper documentation could have retrieved the vehicle), and they'd be held on cash bonds.

Shortly after we began our investigation, the frequency of roadblocks conducted by LPD fell dramatically.

7. Traffic Stops:

Additionally, we have received various reports that Black drivers are targeted outside of roadblocks as well. For example, one woman was pumping gas into her rental vehicle while Christmas shopping with her family. Officer Henderson and Chief Dobbins approached the woman from behind and asked for her ID. As she was not currently

driving and positioned at a gas station pumping gas, she did not understand why she was being asked to present her ID. Her response to Officer Henderson was, “Who is asking?” They then immediately handcuffed her wherein she stated that she would show them her driver’s license. The woman asked her niece to retrieve her wallet so she could show them her license, but Dobbins told the little girl that if she did he would mace her. When the officers finally looked at her license, they noticed she had a different name listed than the one she’d provided them. She told them that was her marital name, but they’ve since separated. Dobbins still arrested the woman for “providing false information” and “not cooperating.” She was fined \$1,283, which she was made to pay in “all cash” directly to LPD.

We also received reports that white drivers, even when intoxicated, were let go with warnings. One such incident was witnessed by multiple Black citizens who then asked the officer, Dobbins, why he let the intoxicated white driver go. This resulted in Dobbins threatening the witnesses to either “go inside or go to jail.”

While our investigation is still ongoing, we have received an overwhelming number of allegations similar to the above. It is clear to us that LPD has harassed the people of Lexington and that racial discrimination and police brutality are rampant within their department. Chief Dobbins and Officer Henderson, while the largest source for these discriminatory practices, were and are supported by the current administration in Lexington. If the video recording of Dobbins had not been released, we believe Dobbins would still be in charge, despite the mountain of complaints against him. Furthermore, we believe there is a strong likelihood that Dobbins misappropriated funds and fabricated charges to steal money from Black citizens in the town of Lexington. To date, Dobbins is still intimidating the people of Lexington. We’ve received reports that he is constantly driving around Black neighborhoods, sometimes with LPD officers, despite the fact that he lives in another county, is no longer the police chief, and has no reason to be there.

The Mississippi Center for Investigative Reporting released an article detailing Dobbins’ past law enforcement history, which included many allegations similar to the information above. These allegations include a history of racially motivated and discriminatory policing practices, police brutality, and sexual harassment. Revenue generated by LPD increased more than threefold once Dobbins was appointed police chief in July 2021. Such fines were often for minor violations such as “no seatbelts,” “following too close,” “no driver’s license,” and “disturbing the peace.”

That article can be accessed at the following link: <https://www.mississippicir.org/news/fired-lexington-police-chief-exposed-in-racist-recording-had-a-checkered-past-in-law-enforcement>.

We hope this letter is helpful. Should you have any questions, do not hesitate to reach out to me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "J Tom". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "J" and "T".

Joshua F. Tom
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