



FAQ about Pattern or Practice Investigations

Q: What is a “pattern or practice?”

A single incident of excessive force or one unlawful stop does not establish a pattern or practice, but can indicate there is a larger problem in a police department. When officers engage in unlawful conduct repeatedly or over a period of time, the police department, as a whole, may be engaging in a pattern or practice of conduct that violates the law. Federal pattern or practice investigations are civil investigations that look at law enforcement practices broadly, rather than focusing on one or a few incidents.

Q: What is a pattern or practice investigation?

A pattern or practice investigation is a thorough and independent investigation conducted by civil rights attorneys at the Justice Department to search for any patterns of misconduct within a given police department. During the investigation, the Justice Department may assess whether any systemic issues in the department contribute to or enable misconduct. A critical part of the investigation is hearing directly from community members and police officers. The Justice Department will interview community members, police officers, local officials, and other community stakeholders. The Justice Department will also observe officers during shifts, review documents and body-worn camera footage, and evaluate specific incidents relevant to the investigation.

Q: Do pattern or practice investigations include investigating individual officers?

Civil investigations during a pattern or practice investigation do not investigate individual officers for criminal violations. Instead, our investigation will determine whether, how, and why a pattern or practice of unlawful conduct by law enforcement officers has occurred.

Q: What is the purpose of a community meeting?

We will hold community meetings throughout our investigation. These community meetings will provide a forum for you to share your experiences and opinions with Justice Department investigators. We are also available by phone or email. See below or scan the QR code to get in touch with us:

Phone: 973-645-2801

Email: USANJ.Community.Trenton@usdoj.gov





DOJ's Investigation into the Trenton Police Department

Q: What is the purpose of this investigation?

The Justice Department, which includes the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of New Jersey, opened this investigation to see if the City of Trenton and the Trenton Police Department (TPD) are engaging in a pattern or practice of conduct that violates the civil rights of people in Trenton.

Q: What will this investigation focus on?

This investigation will focus on (1) whether the Trenton Police Department uses unlawful force, and (2) whether the Trenton Police Department makes unlawful stops, searches, and arrests. The investigation will also include a comprehensive review of TPD's policies and accountability systems, including its handling of citizen complaints and officer discipline. Our investigation will examine the City's and TPD's practices and conduct from 2017 to the present.

Q: Is this a criminal investigation?

No, this investigation is civil and not criminal. If we find evidence that individual officers violated criminal laws, then we will refer those incidents and officers to federal prosecutors at the Justice Department or in the U.S. Attorney's Office.

Q: What happens if DOJ finds a pattern or practice of civil rights violations?

If the Justice Department has reasonable cause to believe that the City of Trenton and the Trenton Police Department have engaged in a prohibited pattern or practice, then we will announce these findings in a public findings report, like those released in Minneapolis and in Louisville earlier this year. Congress has authorized the Justice Department to bring lawsuits to require police departments to remedy violations if they refuse to do so voluntarily.

Q: How long will the investigation last?

We will ensure that this investigation is thorough and efficient. But every investigation is different, and we must follow the facts and law where they lead us. The length of pattern or practice investigations of this type is typically 12 to 18 months.

Q: Will the community play a role in the investigative process?

Yes, we want to hear from community members. Community involvement is critical – the community plays an important role in holding local officials and TPD accountable and in helping to set priorities for public safety in Trenton.