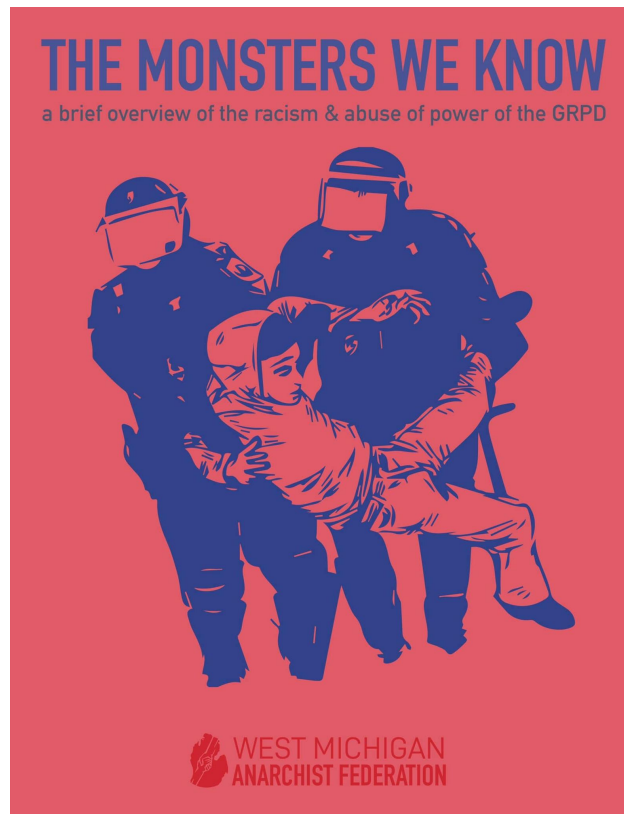


The Monsters We Know

A brief overview of the racism and abuse of the power of the GRPD

West Michigan Anarchist Federation



May 30, 2020

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| In March of 2019 the Michigan Department of Civil Rights conducted a hearing on repeated incidents of abuse by officers of the GRPD. The hearing had a variety of speakers who gave their experiences with injustice perpetuated on them by the GRPD. The Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy reported the statements, they published the following: | 4 |

Tensions have risen significantly throughout May between the police and citizens on a national level. The murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis sparked widespread protests demanding a radical, fundamental change to how we approach policing. Often these discussions are clouded by a focus on individual officers and specific incidents, rather than examining the structure of the police. The problem of power abuse by law enforcement is a structural and systemic issue, not one of individual officers. In recent days we have seen a hyper-focus on specific highly covered incidents, this has led a lot of people to misdirecting and limiting their analysis to specific officers. In an event page advertising a BLM protest in Grand Rapids there was a lot of discussion as to how to prepare for the potential violence brought on by GRPD. These discussions highlighted what happens when your analysis is solely based on individuals. Multiple comments praised GRPD as being respectful and supportive of social movements in the past, a statement that is not only provably false, but also entirely misunderstands why we are in opposition to the police.

Our opposition to law enforcement is rooted in an opposition to unjust hierarchies and imbalanced power structures. We will not truly end the problem of police brutality until we dismantle the structures that allows injustice and abuse to thrive. Putting energy into holding murderous officers accountable after the fact is important, but we have to pair it with the challenging the system that creates these conditions in the first place. Holding abusive officers accountable is important, but if we don't address the root of the problem we will never end the injustices. We need to prosecute the murderers in blue while also working to bring systemic change to prevent more deaths in the future.

An argument that has recently appeared in the online discourse is "police aren't all bad, my cities police force is great!" This argument proves that the average person is not all that tuned in when it comes to what their local police force is actually up to. We have compiled a few examples of how the GRPD typically engages with communities of color in an effort to point out just how universal the problem is. This is by no means a list of every injustice perpetrated by the GRPD, it is just a few recent incidents which indicate the depth of this problem. The WMAF doesn't have the resources to make publications with hundreds of pages so we are unable to outline every abuse of power by the GRPD.

Police terror is not the exception, it is the rule.

Racism and abuse of power is a feature of policing, not an abnormality. for proof of this look no further than our own department: the Grand Rapids Police Department.

December 6th, 2018

OFFENSE: Being 11 year old black girl

Police respond to a suspected stabbing call where the suspect is a 41 year old white woman, upon arriving they found an 11 year old black girl and her aunt in the area. Officers ignored the suspect description and instead put their targets on the child. Forcing her to walk backwards at gunpoint before she was handcuffed and forcibly searched. The officer was given paid leave (vacation) while an internal investigation was conducted. The investigation found that the officer acted justly in his actions and protective measures were put in place to redact the officers name from all documents relating to the case.

March 17th, 2019

OFFENSE: Driving while black

A GRPD officer pulled a black man over for speeding, after approaching the car the officer states, “you better get the fuck out or you’re getting hurt. Got that?!” Before the driver can respond the officer smashes the window, pepper sprays the driver, pulls him out of the car, and begins tasing him. Another officer then arrives to the scene and jumps on top of the recently pepper sprayed and tased driver. The officers then punch, knee, and kick him over 30 times. The driver was arrested on charges of resisting arrest and driving on a suspended license. Upon review GRPD found that they were innocent in any wrongdoing.

March 11th, 2019

OFFENSE: Walking on the street while Latino

GRPD stops two Latino teens ages 16 and 15 for walking down the street rather than using the snow & ice covered sidewalks. The officer draws his gun and holds the teens at gunpoint, making them lay in the road while he handcuffs them. GRPD maintains that they acted according to policy.

November 21st, 2019

OFFENSE: Being a Latino veteran

Jilmar Ramos-Gomez was a US born military veteran living with severe PTSD. His photo appeared on the news one night due to an incident brought on by his PTSD. GRPD Captain Kurt Vanderkooi saw the photo and upon noticing Gomez’s ethnicity he texted other officers to mock Gomez’s condition and race. Unsatisfied with his racism, Vanderkooi decided to call ICE on Gomez, despite never interacting with him and being fully aware that Gomez was a US born veteran. Vanderkooi defended his actions stating that he was simply trying to “fight suspected terrorism”, and upon investigating themselves, GRPD determined that they were innocent of any wrongdoing. It was later discovered that this may have stemmed from ICE asking GRPD to forward any “good leads”.

In March of 2019 the Michigan Department of Civil Rights conducted a hearing on repeated incidents of abuse by officers of the GRPD. The hearing had a variety of speakers who gave their experiences with injustice perpetuated on them by the GRPD. The Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy reported the statements, they published the following:

“The first speaker was a lawyer with the ACLU who recently moved to Grand Rapids specifically the Heritage Hill neighborhood. She shared her experience where the GRPD followed her home in a cruiser, while she and her son were walking home. Then suddenly a black man was walking in the other direction and the GRPD stopped that man. She ended by saying “Grand Rapids is a great place to live, if you are white.”

The second speaker, also with a non-profit advocacy group, addressing two specific cases of police abuse in Grand Rapids, the two Latino youth who were held at gunpoint in the southwest part of GR and the black man who was punched nearly 30 times while driving on the westside.

A black man, who had two relatives who were police officers, said those officers told him that the GRPD is a racist city. He then talked about the two boys who were arrested for walking in the street. He said that, “students from a local high school in his neighborhood always walked in the streets and the track team always ran in the streets, so why were the two Latino boys treated the way they were?”

Another black man spoke, who said he was arrested this past Tuesday by the GRPD. He said there were three police cruisers involved in his arrest. They made him take a sobriety test and one officer said that he appeared to be on something.” He was detained for 7 hours, since that is the time length to sober up, even though he was not high and never has been.

A black woman then talked about an incident from February of 2018. She lives in the Adams Park area. A white woman was drinking in her car and making a great deal of noise and this woman and another neighbor asked for her to keep the noise down. This woman called the police and when the police arrived they spoke with the white woman first who told the officer that the woman who called was the problem. The GRPD officer yelled at the block resident, who also said at this point that she felt her safety was in jeopardy. She called 911 a second time and said the officer didn’t even speak with her, but the response from the dispatcher was to make her feel like she was the problem.

Another lawyer from the ACLU then spoke, specifically about the GRPD’s relationship with ICE. She read a statement that was released earlier in the day by the ACLU along with numerous other documents to support their position on several other cases involving Captain Kurt Vander Kooi.

Another black man shared his story about how the GRPD came to his house and one officer forced his way into this man’s house, resulting in his eye being split open. The GRPD tried to get him to not pursue the complaint against them. He also said that bad cops needed to be weeded out and then says that he thinks there are some good officers.

A black man who is a small business owner, then spoke about a friend of his who was harassed, intimidated and accused of being part of a murder. He said he was tired of this happening over and over again, where the GRPD harasses and intimidates people. He said because he has spoken out, he has been stooped by the GRPD 106 times in recent years.

A black woman then shared a story about being intimidated as well. She feels that the GRPD always wants to justify whatever they do and that the black and brown communities feel this is nothing short of abuse. She also brings up the two youth who were stopped for walking in the street and said that there are so many neighborhoods where it is not safe to walk on the sidewalks.

Another black woman then spoke, sharing stories about a race relations forum in 1991, but felt like nothing good came out of it. She is a criminal justice major and has been pulled over numerous times, for what she stated was just being black. "The GRPD does not follow their own policy and she shared numerous examples of use of force. For instance, she saw a guy in his wheelchair, who was stopped by the GRPD and forced out of his chair and searched. She also addressed the GRPD pulling of guns on youth in this community.

A black woman spoke, who lives in Grand Rapids and has raised her kids in this community and feels that they are at risk from the GRPD. She said that body cameras do not work for the public. The GRPD is racially profiling people, and acknowledges that she doesn't know what to do to keep her children safe

A white woman then speaks about what has happened to her. She owns a business on the west-side and has witnessed members of the GRPD that has removed people from her store. The GRPD always treated people fairly, no matter who they were. This woman was defending the GRPD. One guy sitting next to me said she's at the wrong meeting and numerous people who visibly angered that this white woman not only ignored the previous testimony, but that she felt so entitled to come for the purpose of defending the police. This woman's testimony was the perfect example of white privilege and white arrogance.

Another black woman then spoke and said she does not feel safe and has never felt safe whenever interacting with the GRPD. She called the GRPD when she thought someone was trying to break into her home. When the cop arrived she felt unsafe and like he was questioning her, instead of empathizing with her concerns. She recently called the police after her granddaughter had been abused by her daughter's boyfriend, The GRPD wanted her to call Children Protective Services and seemed disinterested in the violence against her granddaughter.

A black man then shares his story about something that happened in the Madison neighborhood. He has been pulled over numerous times and been told by the GRPD that they have been waiting to pull him over with no clear reason. He owns rental property in the neighborhood and that the GRPD has intimidated him frisking him and physically threatened him sometimes trying to provoke him so that they could use force. He then told a story that about being given a ticket by the GRPD, and while he was in court to pay a fine, the judge said he swore in the courtroom. When this man said he didn't and that could he play the courtroom recording back and the judge said no and sentenced him to 10 days in jail.

A white woman spoke next, sharing two incidents in the past month in the Roosevelt Park neighborhood. The first incident dealt with someone blowing their horn and a neighborhood to move his car. A GRPD officer came and pulled the woman's neighbor out of the car by force and was then detained by the cops because of how disrespectful he spoke to the cops. The GRPD then dropped the charges and said that their body cam footage was deleted. In the second incident, there were 5 cops with guns pointed at 2 black teenagers.

A Latino man spoke about how his experience with the GRPD is that they want to escalate the situation, not de-escalate. The GRPD was called by his ex-girl friend, even though he had not harmed her. but the GRPD said in these cases, someone has to go to jail.”

Another older black man spoke and began by stating that he didn't think this hearing will result in anything. He wanted to see change and not just a fact finding opportunity “Nothing has changed over the years,” he said.

Another black man spoke about a department of Justice case, which he believes the charges were completely fabricated. He said he is moving soon and will never live in Grand Rapids ever again. A black woman who is a member of Messiah Missionary Baptist Church in the SE part of town, spoke next. In recent weeks, members of her church have been targeted by the GRPD for parking violations, in a neighborhood with numerous churches that have high attendance. Just a few blocks away where there are white churches, where members park on both sides of the street and no one is getting a ticket. The same thing is the case, with the white gentrified area on Wealthy St, where there are always lots of people parking on the street, but these people are not being targeted for parking violations by the GRPD.

A 65 year old black man then talks about it being 2019 and this stuff is still going on. An incident he mentions was in the Oakdale neighborhood, where a car crash had taken place. He says there was clear discrimination. His wife has a nice car and she is always being stopped by the GRPD in the area, so you can't have a nice car in this neighborhood without being pulled over? The GRPD has no respect for our community. We pay their salaries. They don't know us and don't even try to know us. Another black man who has lived here for 70 years, then spoke about a lack of representation and no organizational representation for black people. He was critical of the NAACP, since he doesn't think it works for them. He says he is tired of seeing black kids having guns pulled on them, especially since he never sees this happening to white kids. This is not gonna change until a white kid gets killed by the GRPD.” This guy is a truck driver and he says that truck drivers call this city Racist Rapids.

A black woman makes the observation that on the same day this hearing is being held, the racist President is in town. She doesn't take shit from people, so she knows that as a confident black woman she will be targeted by the GRPD. She spoke about having the GRPD called on her in certain businesses. For example, she was arrested in the front of her home, with three cruisers being called and then pulling her out of her car and arrested for no apparent reason. The charges were later dropped, but the damage had been done, especially since her daughter witnessed this abuse. Another black woman, who is a retired court magistrate, talked about in her work experience of people of color being arrested for walking in the street. People should not be afraid to just walk around During her 23 years on the job she never heard of a white person being arrested for walking in the street.

These are not isolated incidents, in fact, there's a long documented history on the corruption in the GRPD. A dive into some of the coverage of incidents involving GRPD shows a clear pattern of abuse of power. In March of 2019 GRPD wasn't even

able to go a full 30 days without engaging in a racist attack, of which there was 3 within the span of March 11th-26th. It is clear that there is a deep seeded problem when a department commits 3 unjust acts of violence within 15 days.

Our opposition to law enforcement is rooted in an opposition to unjust hierarchies and imbalanced power structures. The problem of police brutality will not end until we dismantle the structures that allows injustice and abuse to thrive.

Putting energy into holding murderous officers accountable after the fact is important, but we have to pair it with the challenging the system that creates these conditions in the first place.

Holding abusive officers accountable is important, but if we don't address the root of the problem we will never end the injustices. We need to prosecute the murderers in blue while also working to bring systemic change to prevent more deaths in the future.

To highlight how widespread police injustice is, we have compiled a List of recent abuses of power by the GRPD. Police terror is not a rare occurrence, it is something that occurs in our communities every day.

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