

# Fed probe: Cincinnati police need improvement

By Jennifer Edwards  
Post staff reporter

Four months into a probe of the Cincinnati Police Division's practices and policies, federal investigators said Monday they have identified areas needing improvement, including use of force and training.

But overall, the Justice Department team said, the division is a solid agency that is already making changes to address some identified problems.

Assistant U.S. Attorney General Ralph F. Boyd Jr. outlined the preliminary findings of the team Monday in a meeting with city officials, including Police Chief Thomas Streicher and Mayor Charlie Luken.

Areas the federal team said need improvement include:

Supervision, training and officer decision-making; Use of force policies; and Police handling of citizen complaints to remove impediments and improve accuracy.

Boyd said rank-and-file officers already have incorporated suggestions for improvement made by three law enforcement experts assisting the Justice Department. "Their assistance and cooperation reflects their interest in improving police in Cincinnati and importantly building trust among the city's citizens and communities they serve to protect," Boyd said in a press conference. "There appears to be a solid foundation."

Boyd would not detail specific changes the team is asking the division to make, nor would he say when the investigation would be complete.

Luken conceded the division has room for improvement. He asked for the investigation after an officer shot an unarmed black man April 7, sparking the worst riots Cincinnati



Cincinnati police are out in force in this file photo shot during the April riots sparked by the death of 19-year-old Timothy Thomas, who was shot in a dark alley by an officer.

had seen since the 1960s.

On Monday, Luken noted the police division has not had the money for some improvements the investigators have suggested, including an early-warning computer system to alert supervisors to officers who appear to be having persistent trouble doing their jobs.

"We have a good police division that is getting better and is willing to get better and is willing to accept reasonable recommendations and move forward," the mayor said.

Streicher, who has maintained he did not think investigators would find major problems with the police division, said he was encouraged by the findings so far. Police administrators have had the same concerns federal investigators did and the police division was committed to continuous improvement, he said.

## Officer acquitted in Ohio shooting

CINCINNATI (AP) - A white police officer was acquitted Wednesday in the killing of an unarmed black man that sparked the city's worst racial unrest in three decades.

Officer Stephen Roach had been charged with negligent homicide and obstructing official business after he shot Timothy Thomas, 19, in a dark alley early on April 7.

Hamilton County Municipal Judge Ralph E. Winkler pronounced sentence after hearing the trial without a jury, at Roach's request. The officer did not testify.

"This shooting was a split-second reaction to a very dangerous situation created by Timothy Thomas," Winkler said. "Police Officer Roach's action was reasonable on his part, based on ... the information he had at the time in that dark Cincinnati alley."

He said Roach's record was unblemished, while Thomas' was not, and noted that Thomas failed to respond to an order to show his hands. Thomas had been wanted on a variety of warrants.

The Rev. Damon Lynch, a black leader and minister in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood where Thomas was shot, called the verdict "an atrocity" but said, "We'll urge people to be peaceful, as we have been doing for 10 weeks."

Roach, 27, a city officer since 1997, had faced up to nine months in jail if convicted of both charges. He still faces departmental administrative proceedings under which he could face penalties including firing, police said. In three nights of rioting that followed the shooting, dozens of people were injured and more than 800 were arrested before a temporary citywide curfew ended the disturbance. The city had not seen such racial unrest since the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968.

As a precaution, additional police were on duty when the verdict was announced Wednesday, but there were no disturbances.

A crowd of about 40 blacks gathered outside the courthouse and one yelled, "How is that justified?"

The verdicts show "that the city is not willing to put a police officer in jail for killing a man unjustifiably," said activist Kabaka Oba. "We believe Timothy Thomas was killed unjustifiably."

Roach glanced down while the verdicts were read, and his wife, Erin, sobbed into her hands.

"Unfortunately, this is a tragedy for everybody involved," Roach said later outside the courtroom, holding hands with his wife. "I would give anything to change the outcome of what happened that night, but unfortunately I can't."

Thomas' mother, Angela Leisure, said the verdict was unfair.

"Why is it that officers are not responsible for their acts when other citizens are?" she asked. She said she was afraid there would be a similar shooting.

"My son, I wanted him to be the last - but he won't be the last ... until serious changes are made in our police department this will happen again."

Thomas was the 15th black male killed by Cincinnati police since 1995.

The police union has noted that 10 of those men had fired or pointed guns at police officers, and two of the victims drove at officers or dragged them from cars.

After the riots, Mayor Charles Luken appointed a commission to look into improving opportunities for blacks, who make up 43 percent of the population, and reducing violence in the Ohio River city.

Federal investigators have interviewed dozens of city officials, community leaders and people who say they are victims of racial profiling and police violence. They also have requested and are reviewing thousands of city and police documents and videotapes.

"It is not over," Martin said of the probe. "The findings are not complete."

The Justice Department could sue the city to force reforms if investigators find that the police division has violated civil rights. But so far, everyone involved has stressed it is a cooperative effort aimed at problem-solving, not confrontation.

Community leaders who have been critical of the police said they were not surprised by the deficiencies identified.

"It just points to some of the things we already knew," said the Rev. Damon Lynch III, president of Cincinnati Black United Front and a CAN co-chairman.

"All in all, it is a pretty good police force, but it can use some improvements. A large part is just customer service, how Cincinnati police officers show respect for the people that they serve."

Customer service, which is probably 80 percent of the work they do, needs to be greatly enhanced."

Fraternal Order of Police President Keith Fangman said he has spoken with several Justice Department officials and all of them agree the department is sound.

"As far as we're concerned, we feel as if we've gotten a thumbs up from the Justice Department," he said. "A lot of the attacks on this police division were politically motivated. It appears the Justice Department has used facts instead of emotion in their positive findings of our department."

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