

Filing a Complaint with the Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties

Filing a Complaint

Instead of filing a lawsuit, you may want to send a complaint to the Office for Civil Rights, which is a division in the U.S. Department of Justice.

The Office for Civil Rights can investigate complaints of police discrimination and act to pull their federal funding because of the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act which states, “No person in the United States shall, on the ground of race be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.”[1] Filing a complaint with the OCR is important because it is one way we can hold racist policing accountable. Each complaint is one more piece of the evidence that the federal government is provided with when deciding whether to pull the funding from police departments for their racist and discriminatory behavior.

Anonymity of a Complaint

Complaints to the OCR can be filed either anonymously or not. Anonymously means your personal contact information, like name and address, are not disclosed to any investigating agency that may choose to investigate your complaint. However, the OCR makes it clear that complaints filed anonymously are more likely to be closed because they are more difficult to investigate.[2] This means that if you choose to include your name and other contact information in the complaint it is much more likely that your complaint will remain open.

Timing of a Complaint

There is a limited time window for filing complaints with the Office for Civil Rights for discrimination. Civil rights complaints must be filed within 180 days to a year of the incident.[3] This means that the sooner you file your complaint after the incident has occurred, the more likely you are to have your complaint investigated.

Steps to File a Complaint Online

Filing a complaint online will take about fifteen minutes. The steps to file a complaint online are below:

1. Navigate to the US Department of Justice’s [“Contact the Department of Justice to report a civil rights violation”](#) form.[4]
2. Fill in your contact information. The form can be filled out anonymously as well, but, as previously stated, it is more likely your complaint will be investigated if you include your contact information.
3. Select your primary concern for reporting. If you are reporting something police related, you should select, “Mistreated by police, correctional staff, or inmates”.

4. Fill in the location details of where the violation or your rights occurred.
5. Select the characteristic reason, like “Race/color”, you believe influences the way you were treated. You can select one or multiple characteristics from the list they provide.
6. Fill in the date your rights were violated on.
7. Write a description of what happened when your rights were violated in 500 words or less. Try to include as much detail as possible in your description like the names of any possible witnesses and the time of the incident.
8. The last step is to review your complaint and submit it. You are able to edit any previous responses by clicking “edit this page” before you click “submit report” to send your complaint to the OCR for review.

After a Complaint Is Filed

After you have filed your complaint, there is a small possibility that someone from within the Department of Justice may contact you to get additional information related to their investigation. Generally, however, after you submit a complaint to the OCR, you should not expect to hear anything back from them.

Even though you may or may not hear back, we still recommend that you and others who have experienced police violence or discrimination fill out the online form. The likelihood that the OCR acts is often based on the number of complaints they receive. This means that the more complaints that are filed the more likely the OCR is to take them seriously and investigate. Spreading the word and completing the form is one way we can work towards more accountability for racist policing practices in Louisiana.

[1] 34 U.S.C. § 10228(c)(1) (1994).

[2] Office for Civil Rights (OCR), FAQs Regarding Filing a Complaint: Can I make a confidential complaint?, Last accessed on July 20, 2023, <https://www.ojp.gov/program/civil-rights-office/faqs-regarding-filing-complaint?page=0#faq-can-i-make-a-confidential-complaint>.

[3] Office for Civil Rights (OCR), FAQs Regarding Filing a Complaint: Is there a time limit for when I may file my complaint?, Last accessed on July 20, 2023 <https://www.ojp.gov/program/civil-rights-office/faqs-regarding-filing-complaint?page=0#faq-is-there-a-time-limit-for-when-i-may-file-my-complaint>.