

Michigan: 16-year-old dies after police Taser shooting

Tom Eley
16 April 2009

Last week, a 16-year-old Michigan boy died after police fired a Taser “stun gun” on him. Robert Mitchell fled police after a routine traffic stop Friday morning, in Warren, Michigan, an industrial suburb adjacent to Detroit. Although Mitchell posed no danger, police pursued him on foot to an abandoned building in Detroit, where they claim they Tasered him once. Mitchell was pronounced dead shortly afterward.

On Tuesday night at a meeting of the Warren City Council, family members and residents expressed outrage over the incident.

“A nonviolent child is dead,” said Charlotte McGlory, Mitchell’s grandmother. “There was no crime committed. He doesn’t have a driver’s license. All he did was run. We need to stop the use of Tasers.” Mitchell’s family has approached an attorney and may sue the city for damages.

“We’re sick and tired of our young people dying at the hands of these policeman who are supposed to be professional,” said Sandra Hienes of the Detroit Coalition Against Police Brutality.

Warren Mayor Jim Fouts indicated the city would review the way the Taser gun is used by police. “Any time there is a tragic death you need to reevaluate. We want to make sure we have a safe, crime-free city and balance that with no tragic, needless death,” Fouts said.

Police and media accounts of the death have raised the question of why Mitchell, who was black, fled police. Police, according to the *Detroit Free Press*, “are left with a burning question: Why did he run?”

Mitchell was a passenger in the car, which police say had expired license plate tags, and had committed no crime. Police violence, however, is a fact of life for black youth in the Detroit area. It is possible Mitchell, who has been described as a “special education

student,” ran out of fright.

For their part, the police have not explained why they felt it necessary to pursue him so aggressively when he posed no threat.

Warren Police Commissioner William Dwyer claimed Mitchell “was violently resisting arrest,” but did not explain how. According to another police spokesman, the youth “came down the stairs” of the abandoned house and “assaulted the officers.”

Police have acknowledged that Mitchell was unarmed. He was small, standing about five foot two inches tall (157 centimeters) and weighing 110 pounds (50 kilograms).

McGlory’s description of her grandson casts further doubt on the unlikely scenario provided by police. “Robert was shy. He was learning disabled,” she was quoted in *candgnews.com* as saying. “His chronological age was 16 but he was operating at like a 10- or an 11-year-old, so who knows? He was a little guy. He wasn’t a threat. They seen he wasn’t a threat.”

“I don’t know how you handle a 110-pound teenager when you have multiple officers, trained in defensive tactics,” said Ron Scott, also of the Detroit Coalition Against Police Brutality. “I think the question is whether or not there was even probable cause to chase the teenager into Detroit.”

The police who chased Mitchell and fired the Taser were placed on two-day administrative leave and have since returned to work.

Mitchell is the second Michigan teen killed after being hit by a Taser in less than one month. On March 22, in the small town of Bay City, Michigan, 15-year-old Brett Elder died after police fired a Taser on him. Elder, who was white, was likely handcuffed at the time. Like Mitchell, Elder was small of stature and suffered from a learning disability. (See “Bay City,

Michigan: Fifteen-year-old dies after Taser shooting”)

The Taser gun, also called an “electrical control device,” delivers a high-voltage shock to the victim’s body through wires connecting it to a pistol. The weapon overrides the body’s nervous system, causing uncontrollable skeletal muscle spasms, disabling the victim. The electrical current is supposed to last for five seconds. The pain, victims say, is agonizing.

Police and advocates of the Taser claim that it averts police use of handguns. However, evidence suggests that police may be tempted to use Tasers when no weapon or police violence is needed—for example, firing them into the backs of fleeing suspects, using them on those already arrested or otherwise under police control, and using them on allegedly “uncooperative” suspects, such as Mitchell.

In Mitchell’s case, whether there might have been complicating medical factors may only be revealed by an autopsy. Mitchell had asthma and was on medication for attention deficit disorder.

It is clear that Tasers can be lethal weapons. A web site that keeps track of Taser-related deaths now counts 403 fatalities in North America since 2001. Amnesty International, along with a number of civil rights organizations, has called for a moratorium on the use of Tasers pending further scientific study of their effects.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact