

Michigan: Autopsy confirms police taser responsible for teenager's death

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The Macomb County Medical Examiner's Office on Tuesday released the results of an autopsy performed on the body of 16-year-old Robert Mitchell. Mitchell died on April 10 after being shocked with a taser by a Warren police officer. The medical examiner's results indicate that the taser shock likely caused the teenager's death.

Mitchell had been riding in the passenger seat of his cousin's car when they were pulled over for a routine traffic stop in Warren, Michigan, an industrial suburb adjacent to Detroit. For reasons that remain unclear, he fled from the police, who chased him to an abandoned building, where they cornered him and proceeded to administer the 50,000-volt shock that would prove fatal for the youth who had not violated a single law.

Mitchell had a preexisting genetic condition that caused irregular heartbeats. His heart was unable to sustain the shock of the taser, and he died almost instantly from cardiac arrest.

He was guilty of nothing more than fleeing the scene in an urban area in which the police force is notorious for the gratuitous violence it routinely uses against young black males, which is the precise demographic to which Mitchell belonged.

It is probable that Mitchell fled out of fear, as there were no outstanding warrants against him, and nothing incriminating was found on his person at the time of death. He and his cousin were pulled over for an expired license plate; his cousin told cable news channel CNN that the boy was "petrified" by the police. Mitchell's mother said he was learning disabled.

Mitchell's death is the latest in a long list of confirmed taser-induced fatalities in the US. In March, a 15-year-old boy in Bay City, Michigan died after

being tased by police while handcuffed. (See "Bay City, Michigan: Fifteen-year-old dies after Taser shooting") On January 8, a 130-pound, 17-year-old boy in Martinville, Virginia was pronounced dead immediately after being shot with a taser by police.

Since 2001, police use of the controversial weapon, which proponents promote as a non-lethal alternative to handguns, has resulted in at least 336 deaths within the US and hundreds more worldwide, according to Amnesty International.

At five feet two inches tall and weighing just 110 pounds, the unarmed Mitchell posed a threat neither to the officers nor to the civilians of the surrounding community. The circumstances of the incident can in no way be deemed to have warranted the use of lethal force.

A lack of threat posed by the victims is, however, a commonplace characteristic of death by taser in the US. In a 2008 study conducted by Amnesty International entitled "USA: Less than lethal?" the human rights organization "found that 90 percent of those who died after being struck with a Taser were unarmed and many did not appear to present a serious threat."

Even when it does not result in the death of its victim, the taser is an unnecessarily brutal weapon in an officer's arsenal. When used in ranged mode, the weapon propels a pair of barbed probes into a subject's clothing or flesh at a range of up to 21 feet (6 meters). The probes are connected to the taser via insulated wires, through which the weapon delivers a 50,000-volt shock that instantaneously overrides the subject's peripheral nervous system and causes extreme pain.

One firearms consultant quoted by the Associated Press described the experience of taser electroshock as "the most profound pain I've ever felt." (See "Amnesty International reports 152 taser-related deaths

in the US”)

The officers who killed Mitchell faced virtually no censure, and are still at large. After a mere two-day administrative leave, they came back to work.

Indeed, the department has stridently justified the officers’ actions. Warren Police Commissioner William Dwyer told CNN that the cops involved had “ordered him several times not to resist, and he continued to resist. They had no alternative to use what they felt at the time was non-lethal force.” Dwyer insisted that from the teen’s flight, police could “only assume he committed a crime or is wanted for a crime ... so there was nothing wrong with using that Taser.”

Officer impunity is commonplace in incidents of lethal taser usage within the United States. In an earlier report by Amnesty International, released in 2006, the organization makes clear that it is extremely rare for taser use to be deemed excessive in subsequent investigations, and rarer still for officers to be reprimanded or disciplined, much less prosecuted. Just as the conditions surrounding Mitchell’s victimization are typical, so are the conditions surrounding the Warren Police Department’s defense of the perpetrators of the this particularly egregious form of police brutality.

On May 21, Mitchell’s family and the Detroit Coalition Against Police Brutality held a rally to memorialize his life and call for prosecution of the officers responsible for his death. Hundreds of people showed up to the rally, demonstrating the frustration and anger permeating the working population of Detroit over the continual deterioration of living conditions in the city.

Unemployment in the state of Michigan reached 14.1 percent in May, and all indications are that it will continue to rise as the recessions deepens and the Obama administration further dismantles the auto industry. The auto companies, and the financial moguls who have decisive control of the stocks of these corporations, have eliminated hundreds of thousands of jobs in the city, resulting in mass emigration from the once thriving industrial metropolis, plunging those who remain into poverty. The ensuing desperation, more than anything, is the cause of the tense environment in which police violence continues to thrive.

This reporter interviewed D’Artagnan Collier, the Socialist Equality Party’s candidate in the upcoming

Detroit mayoral election. He commented: “This death should not be seen as an isolated incident, but as part of a broader trend related to the destruction of jobs, education and living standards throughout Detroit and the United States. The ruling class has no jobs and no future to offer young people. All that is available for them is taser shocks, poverty and police repression.”



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