

# Portland police chief defends latest police killing

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Portland (Oregon) Police Bureau (PPB) Chief Mike Reese held a briefing last week on the shooting death of a suicidal young man late last month by one of his officers.

On January 25, 21-year-old Bradley Lee Morgan called 911 saying he had a knife and threatened to jump from the ninth story of a downtown parking garage. After approaching Morgan and talking to him for a few minutes, two police officers, David Scott and Sgt. John Holbrook, drew their guns and fired multiple shots at Morgan when, according to police officials, he pulled out a gun. A replica handgun was found next to his body after the shooting. The autopsy report said that his death was caused by a single gunshot to the head.

The obviously troubled young man had recently broken up with his partner and lost custody of their son. On Morgan's Facebook page postings, he referred to his distress over the separation and, as well, having to sleep in a homeless shelter.

The state of Oregon has seen four deaths by police so far this year of either mentally ill or inebriated men. In Portland, between January 2010 and June 2011, five men were shot by city police officers, four of them killed. According to Jenny Westberg, board member of the Mental Health Association of Portland, "Since 1980, at least 220 people have been shot, shot at, or killed by Portland-area police."

Last June, the US Department of Justice (DOJ) opened a civil investigation into allegations of the use of excessive force by the PPB and a pattern of civil rights abuses. The DOJ will "seek to determine whether there are systemic violations of the Constitution or federal law by officers of the PPB." A previous review by the DOJ's Civil Rights Division had determined that an investigation of incidents between the PPB and people with mental illness was warranted.

The investigation was announced after the January 2010 shooting of Aaron Campbell by a "lethal cover officer." Police were called because of suicidal statements by Campbell after the death of his 25-year-old brother. After exiting the home backwards with his hands interlaced at the back of his head, police fired six beanbag rounds at him because he failed to put his hands up in the air. He was then shot in the back with a lethal round from an AR-15 assault rifle.

The city of Portland this month settled a federal wrongful death civil-rights lawsuit with Campbell's family for \$1.2 million. Additionally, the settlement required Democratic mayor Sam Adams to make a public apology to the Campbell family.

PPB chief Reese, backed up by a bevy of mental health care professionals, sought to defend his officers' use of deadly force in Bradley Morgan's shooting by seeking to shift blame to what is an admittedly broken mental health care system, a defense which the local media immediately bolstered. "We're trying to do good in a very broken system," Reese said.

Recent reports show a sharp increase in suicides and attempted suicides. A PPB graph for Westside Portland shows a 223 percent increase in attempted suicides and a 143 percent increase in suicides from 2007 to 2008, the year that saw the beginning of the recession.

The involvement of police in dealing with the suicidal and mentally ill, with all too often deadly consequences, has grown dramatically in the last 10 years. According to the police bureau, calls involving someone who is "attempting suicide, threatening suicide or has completed suicide" have doubled since 2001, when 630 such calls were made. In contrast, 1,200 calls were made in 2011, with 1,100 of the callers taken into protective custody.

Much of this growth is attributable to the severe

financial stress of mass unemployment caused by the 2008 recession and the consequent impoverishment of a significant layer of the working class. Unemployment more than doubled, rising from 5.2 percent in January 2008 to 11.6 percent in May-June 2009. The Oregon jobless rate still remains high—8.9 percent in December 2011, the 15th highest in the nation.

The unemployment rolls decreased by 29,152 individuals in December. However, there were only 2,200 jobs added that month. According to a November posting by the state Employment Department: “Approximately 500 individuals will exhaust all of their benefits each week until the end of the year. In January and February of 2012 there are more than 25,000 claimants expected to exhaust all of their available benefits as the extension programs come to an end.”

Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans returning to Oregon have seen high suicide rates, constituting approximately 27 percent of all suicides in the state. Many veterans are psychologically damaged by the bloody neo-colonial operation. The grievous unemployment situation, with the accompanying intensification of social tensions and lack of social services, can only serve to aggravate an already perilous mind-set.

Both mental health programs and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, woefully inadequate to begin with, have experienced further cutbacks. TANF lost 16 percent of its 2011 funding at the federal level, and additional cuts and restrictions were imposed due to Oregon’s budget crisis.

Between 2007, when the recession began, and 2010, poverty rose 22 percent, reaching in that year nearly 16 percent of Oregon’s residents. TANF caseloads soared during the same period by 57 percent to 30,000 enrollees. Meanwhile, food stamp use rose 76 percent. Deep poverty, defined as earning less than \$8,687 per year, rose to 7.2 percent.

Speaking to the Oregon Health Policy Board last September, Richard Harris, administrator for the state’s Addiction and Mental Health office, stated that mental health services provide services to less than 40 percent of demonstrated need.

Despite Portland’s claims to liberalism, or perhaps due to it, the city’s police force has a long history of

brutality and shootings. Chief Reese’s focus on mental health care shortcomings, rather than police procedures, makes clear that this policy will continue.



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