

# Cleveland, Ohio police killing sparks outrage

David Brown  
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Over 150 Clevelanders packed into a public forum Thursday night to ask questions and denounce the police killing of two people last week. Unsatisfied with the answers they were receiving, people in the crowd accused the city officials of racism and murder.

Malissa Williams, 30, and Timothy Russell, 43, were killed on November 29, when 13 officers fired 137 bullets into their car after a high-speed chase. Williams was hit by 24 bullets and Russell 23.

The chase began outside the Cleveland Justice Center when two officers heard what they claimed to be a gunshot and saw Russell drive off in his 1979 Chevrolet Malibu. Grainy security video released Friday showed the moment the chase started, with an officer leaping into his cruiser to chase after them. The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* noted that the sound may have been a backfire, but that “will likely have little bearing on determining if police reacted appropriately.”

Over the next 26 minutes, a total of 30 police cruisers would take part in the chase. Police cornered Russell on an access road leading to a middle school. There, 13 officers opened fire. At least one officer reportedly fired 30 to 40 rounds, meaning that he would have reloaded at least once. Some of the bullets left holes in police cruisers, suggesting a scene of indiscriminate and uncontrolled shooting.

No gun or casings have been found in Russell’s car or along the chase route.

The NAACP organized the public forum along with city officials in an attempt to quiet public anger over the shocking use of force. Speaking for the city were Democratic mayor Frank Jackson, Public Safety Director Martin Flask, and police Chief Michael McGrath. The tone of the meeting was set early on by the victims’ families.

Walter Jackson, Williams’ uncle, interrupted McGrath’s opening remarks to ask, “Will these officers be brought up on murder charges?” The crowd

responded with applause.

There were occasional chants from the crowd of “murder,” and many of the people who spoke accused the Police Department of racism. Both Russell and Williams were black while 12 of the officers shooting were white and one Hispanic. Others pointed to economic discrimination at the hands of the police. Williams was homeless.

Charlotte Robinson, who identified herself as Williams’ cousin, said that homeless people like Williams were special targets of the police. “They wanted to murder her. They wanted to get rid of her and they did,” she said.

The economic situation facing many in Cleveland is dire. The median household income is only \$27,470—just over half the national average of \$52,762. A full 32.6 percent of the people in Cleveland live below the poverty line.

One resident who spoke raised the impact this shooting could have on Mayor Frank Jackson’s reelection, saying, “All of a sudden we’ve got this one big case that has a very threatening tendency to your leadership, to your mayor’s office, to the police chief.” Actually challenging the mayor or the police chief was far from the NAACP’s intentions when they organized the forum.

When Jackson took office in 2006, he implemented a policy on excessive force stating that officers were not to “unreasonably place themselves in a position where a threat of imminent danger or death or physical injury is created when attempting to stop a motor vehicle or apprehend a felony suspect.” The rule was intended to curb situations where police officers invoked imminent danger as a justification for deadly force. In the months preceding the policy, Cleveland police were involved in five shootings, four of them resulting in deaths.

The day after the meeting, Cleveland NAACP president, Reverend Hilton Smith, told ABC 5 news

that the mayor “was very honest. Everything that he said, the mayor will do.” Ignoring the allegations of police discrimination raised at the meeting, he added that the police chief’s ability to be fair is not in question and that the community “respect[s] him greatly.”

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