

Suicidal teen shot sixteen times by Kansas police

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On August 23rd, police shot and killed Joseph Jennings, an unarmed teenager, in Ottawa, Kansas. Jennings' death comes amid a wave of police killings, including that of 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, which triggered protests against police violence this month.

Jennings, 18, was shot at least sixteen times, including multiple shots to his back, according to a witness. Witnesses also say there were at least fifteen officers at the scene of his death and that five or six of the officers drew weapons and shot. Jennings was unarmed.

Police claim they had been called to the scene after someone reported an armed man pacing around the parking lot of a hardware store.

At the time of his death, Jennings was suffering from severe mental illness. His aunt, Brandy Smith, told the local KCTV5 news station that "He was suffering from depression, seizures and anxiety."

On Friday, a day before his death, he had tried to kill himself. Smith said that Jennings' seizures had become worse and worse, leading the teenager to feel hopeless and suicidal. "He was a good kid and he was very funny ... he had a lot of friends and people who loved him." But, she explained, "He was tired of the seizures."

Jennings wrote on Facebook, ten minutes before swallowing 60 or so pills, "Tonight is the night goodbye everyone!!!! It was truly a good ride! And I'm sorry for who I might of hurted and people that I may of offended, But I love all my family and I hope you don't hold this against me." The police who came and took him to the hospital were reportedly the same officers that shot him.

Saturday night, Jennings was released from the hospital. William Burton, Jennings foster father, said

that Jennings', after being released, walked over at Walmart. "He was walking back [from Walmart] and [police] said they had a complaint and stuff on him out here making a scene," Burton said.

Huston Harris, a witness, told KAKE News, "As I was looking, [the police] kept getting closer. They pulled the guns out. They kept getting closer and closer. You could hear them tell him to, 'Get down, get down.'"

Brandy Smith, in her interview with KCTV5, said "My husband was going to tackle him. He was within arm's reach. They said to get back or they were going to shoot him."

After police threatened to fire on her husband, he backed off. Police then began shooting bean bag rounds at Joseph. "The cop yelled out, 'bag him,' and then three shots were fired with the bags," she said. Police then proceeded to fire live ammunition at Joseph. "I just don't know how many shots were fired. They shot him in the back of the leg and the back of the shoulder," said Ms. Smith. Crying, Smith asked "Why did it take them shooting him 16 times at least for them to bring him down and go and take care of what they needed to take care of?"

She continued, "I was there from the beginning to the end. I told the officers, 'he's wanting you to shoot him. Don't do it, he has mental health [problems].'"

When questioned by a reporter if Jennings was armed, why the police shot him, and what danger he posed, the local police chief stated, "well that goes into the specifics ... we're not going to comment on any of the details because, as I said, this is an ongoing investigation."

Smith told KCTV5, "I never thought it would hit this close to home." She drew a connection to the recent fatal shooting of Michael Brown, another 18-year-old,

in neighboring Missouri by police, “My condolences go out to the victims of the Ferguson incident. I’m living it, too.”

Ottawa, a small town, southwest of Kansas City, had a population of 12,649 in 2010. According to a 2000 US Census, eight years before the start of the financial crisis, per capita income was at \$16,840, well below the nation’s 2000 per capita income of \$22,199. According to the 2010 census, 91% of the city is white. Jennings, the victim, was also white.

Days before the shooting, Kansas Health Institute published an article entitled “Kansas mental health system under increasing stress: Promise of federal and state reform initiatives remains unrealized,” documenting millions of dollars of cuts imposed on various medical centers throughout the state.

Mental health has been one of the areas most severely affected by the cuts. A mental health center director interviewed in the article, states, “If you go back to the late 1950s, early 1960s, there were 5,500 inpatient psychiatric beds in Kansas ... Today, there are fewer than 500 ... They’re gone.” The article notes that “more than a third of the state’s 9,600 inmates are known to have a mental illness.”



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