Notes on police violence in America

Missoula, Montana police accused of fabricating story after officer kills man “execution style”

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An attorney representing the family of a man killed by a police officer in Missoula, Montana openly contested the official account of events given by the authorities. “I’m just going to call it like I see it. It’s execution style,” he said. The attorney, Terance Perry, told the *Missoulian* that the family of Kaileb Williams disputes almost every detail of the official police story as false.

According to the Missoula County Sheriff’s Office, the incident occurred around 2 a.m. on Wednesday, December 31st. Dispatchers received a call from Williams’ mother, who said her son assaulted her and drove away in her car with his girlfriend. Police claim that Williams’ mother told dispatchers that he had taken the fiancée hostage and might have a knife. Williams’ mother denies this, saying simply that she had reported the assault and did not wish to press charges. She made no mention of a weapon.

A high-speed chase ensued between Williams and officers, when police claim Williams abruptly stopped the car the wrong way at an on-ramp to Interstate 90. Perry and Williams’ family said that they had stopped before at an apartment complex to talk and at several other moments, and that the fiancée had the opportunity to leave the car if she wanted. The fiancée denies that she had been taken hostage and did not believe at any point that Williams wanted to harm her.

Williams and his fiancée did in fact drive up a ramp onto Interstate 90 when the car died. At this point law enforcement surrounded the car. Police claim that it was difficult to see what was happening inside the car between Williams and his girlfriend, but that they could see the girlfriend lying down and could hear her crying for help. They claim officers then tried to break in the car windows to save her.

According to police, the fiancée stated in an interview that Williams had told her that he was going to drive into oncoming traffic and kill both of them. She claims she never made that statement at any point.

Perry said the fiancée denies that she cried for help and at that point was not in fear of her life. According to the official police statement, Williams had his fiancée in a “lethal stranglehold” when an officer shot him once through the head. Both Perry, Williams’ mother and fiancée all claim that never happened.

“I’m a little confused about their statement. Somehow they can see she is being strangled or held down, but they say it’s too dark to see if there is a weapon,” Perry said. The fiancée said that he never tried to strangle her. “He was holding her head down because he was afraid the police were going to shoot at her,” Perry said.

When Williams’ mother arrived to identify her son’s body, a law enforcement officer told her that he had “committed suicide with a firearm.” Police left his corpse on the Interstate on-ramp overnight, finally moving it to the coroner’s office at 10 a.m. It was only after the autopsy that the police presented their side of the story to local news. “There’s an attempt to construct a justification for the use of fatal force here,” Perry said. The vast gulf between the official stories of the authorities and that of Williams’ family is unmistakable.

St. Louis man faces decades in prison over social media posts

A St. Louis man was charged Thursday with 10 felony counts of "making a terrorist threat" against police and the St. Louis Justice Center. Jason Valentine, 35, was arrested and charged over vaguely threatening statements he had posted to his Twitter account. Each count is a class C felony, which carries a sentence of 3 to 10 years jail time. If Valentine is found guilty, he could face as many as 100 years in prison—an effective life sentence.

News sources quote portions of the tweets Valentine

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allegedly made, which included phrases such as “kill a pig night” as well as the hash tag “#KillJeffRoorda,” a reference to the business manager of the St Louis Police Officers Association who was a vocal supporter of Darren Wilson, the police officer recently cleared of all charges after shooting an unarmed African-American teen in Ferguson, Missouri earlier last year. Valentine had also allegedly tweeted: “St Louis City Justice Center Mysteriously Exploded 12/31/2014.”

Because Valentine’s Twitter account has been suspended, the tweets in question are not available to the public view. He is being held on a $100,000 cash-only bail, and the particular jail at which he is being held was not disclosed to the press. According to the *New York Times*, it remains unclear whether or not Valentine has an attorney or when he will first appear in court.

No evidence presented either by police or news sources demonstrates any ability or intent to actually carry out the types of activities described in Valentine’s alleged tweets. Despite that fact, police claim that Valentine had knowingly and publicly made a threat both to kill police officers as well as to blow up the St. Louis Justice Center, and that his tweets had the explicit intent of “frightening 10 or more people.” Because of this distinction, according to police, Valentine's statements are not protected under the 1st Amendment.

St. Louis Chief of Police Sam Dotson told the press, “I would equate it to walking through an airport and saying you had a bomb strapped to you. Certainly in the world we live in, post-9/11, that strikes fear in people and requires law enforcement to take action.” The Chief’s comment, taken in context with the unrest in Ferguson and the greater St. Louis area, makes clear the case’s politically-motivated character.

Family calls for indictment of officer who killed young boy

The family of Tamir Rice, the 12-year-old boy shot by Cleveland police on November 23rd, told reporters that they believe the video of Tamir’s shooting outside a recreation center constitutes enough evidence to indict the police officer who pulled the trigger.

Speaking at press conference called by the Rice family, Attorney Benjamin Crump, who has represented the families of Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown, said “We think the video speaks for itself.” He went on to claim that there are still unanswered questions surrounding the case, such as why Officer Timothy Loehmann shot Rice in less than two seconds after arriving at the scene.

Just last week, the investigation was handed over to the Cuyahoga County Sheriff’s Department. The decision was cited to “offer an extra layer of impartiality,” according to claims by officials. Cleveland police have already scrambled to justify Rice’s killing by blaming the victim and his family. Police have attempted to portray the 12-year-old as a danger to his community. Despite this, Crump told the press that Rice’s family is “cautiously optimistic” about the results of the investigation.

Body camera footage withheld following police shooting

Police department and city officials of Duluth, Minnesota, have withheld footage taken by body cameras worn by police at the time of an officer-involved shooting. The incident occurred in August, when officers responded to a domestic call concerning a man who was threatening to commit suicide.

Joe Zontelli, 34, had barricaded himself in the garage of his home and was threatening to kill himself with a knife. Police officers responding to the scene entered the garage and shot Zontelli twice, later claiming they feared for their lives. Zontelli survived after receiving medical attention and the officers were cleared of any wrongdoing.

Duluth was the first major police department in Minnesota to adopt body-worn cameras for their officers. Flying in the face of claims that body camera footage would act as a method of public oversight, the footage was shown to the county prosecutor and then became classified.

Police and city officials cite their decision to withhold the footage to protect "private places" such as schools, hospitals, or residences. According to Duluth police department policy, officers are required to turn on their body cameras during "crimes in progress" and "use of force." The policy does not state whether or not residents are legally able to opt out of recording.

Many police departments that implemented the use of body cameras do not have any sort of uniform policy regarding the usage of the devices at all. Instead, footage is likely to be captured and released on a case-by-case basis at the full discretion of the authorities themselves.

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