

No charges for police officer who shot Illinois teen twice in the back

Marcus Day
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Prosecutors announced Thursday that they would not bring criminal charges against the Zion, Illinois police officer who shot 17-year-old Justus Howell twice in the back April 4, killing him.

A surveillance video released by state prosecutors last week shows the end of the chase, as Howell is shot from behind and falls to the ground. The video is taken from across the street and does not appear to show him either beginning to turn toward the pursuing officer or holding a gun.

LaToya Howell, Justus' mother, told reporters outside the courthouse Thursday, "I have seen that video. There is nothing that suggests they should execute my son. His back was turned. He was no threat."

State's Attorney Mike Nerheim claimed that an investigation by the Lake County Major Crimes Task Force—carried out under the supervision of the FBI—had determined that the use of deadly force by the police officer was justified.

There is every reason to believe—as in so many other instances of police violence against workers and youth—that the investigation was aimed solely at carrying out a whitewash and cover-up.

Howell's killer, Officer Eric Hill, had previously been reported for having tasered a woman eight times in the course of responding to a domestic dispute.

Hill has remained on paid leave during the course of the investigation, but is expected to return to active duty soon.

The announcement that Hill would walk free came just two days after a Madison, Wisconsin district attorney announced that he would not bring charges against the police officer who killed Tony Robinson, an unarmed teenager, in March.

Police claim that Howell met with Tramond Peet, 18,

in Zion, a small city 45 miles north of Chicago, in order to buy a handgun for \$600. The gun was allegedly stolen from a home in nearby Lake Villa several days before their meeting. Peet was later arrested and has been charged with aggravated unlawful use of a weapon.

Authorities claim that Howell attempted to wrest the gun away from Peet without paying for it, in the course of which the gun was dropped and fired. A witness who heard the gunshot phoned the police, who arrived at the scene and saw Howell flee. During a brief foot chase, police claim that Howell began to turn around toward Hill while holding the gun. Hill fired twice at him in quick succession: one bullet struck Howell in the shoulder, while the other pierced his heart, spleen and liver.

A coroner for Lake County, after performing an autopsy of Howell, ruled the death a homicide. Although preliminary tests did not find any gunshot residue on his hands, the Illinois State Police Crime Lab claimed Thursday that some had been found.

State's Attorney Nerheim claimed that the autopsy showed that the trajectory of the bullets that entered Howell demonstrated that he was bent over and turning as he was hit. What is just as likely, however, is that he stumbled or twisted as he ran.

Prosecutors have also claimed that a gun was recovered from within a foot of Howell's head, and that a forensic examination had found his thumbprint and DNA on the weapon. However, at least two witnesses have disputed claims by police that Howell was armed when he was shot, or that a weapon was recovered at the scene.

Bobbie Vaughn, who lives near the site of the shooting, told the *Chicago Sun-Times* in April that she followed a police officer to the scene after hearing

gunshots. “I heard the officer tell the other officer, ‘I shot him,’” she said. “They were shaking him, but he didn’t move. He was on his stomach, so they turned him over and the police officer I was with gave him CPR.”

Vaughn stated further that she remained nearby for some time and did not see police recover a weapon at any point. “I didn’t see a gun, no knife, nothing.”

Michael Dizzzone told a local TV news station that his wife, who lives with him directly across the street from the shooting and was looking out the window when it took place, did not see Howell with a gun before or after he was shot. “She saw him fall to the ground. She was really upset,” he said.

Zion Police Chief Stephen Dumyahn told the press that he “didn’t know” if any of the department’s policies would change as a result of the shooting. “I’m confident [Hill] acted appropriately,” Dumyahn said. “This has been a very tense situation for him and his family.”

An attorney for Howell’s family, Matthew Dudley, said that they intended to file a federal lawsuit against the Zion Police Department in the coming days.

Several dozen people protested in downtown Waukegan, the seat of Lake County, Friday. In an attempt to intimidate potential demonstrators, officials closed down the Lake County Courthouse and Administrative buildings, in addition to several city streets.

Members of Howell’s family have denounced the decision not to prosecute the police officer who killed the young man. His mother stated, “They gunned my son down. One of my worst fears was confirmed when I heard there would be no justice.”

Alice Howell, the teen’s grandmother, said, “Justus was a loveable, intelligent and bright person. The picture [the police] are painting of him isn’t true.” She compared his killing to that of Walter Scott, saying, “This was an unjustified homicide...There is no difference between the murder in South Carolina and the murder of my grandson.”

Walter Scott was shot in the back and killed while running away from the police in South Carolina April 4—the same day as Justus. The local police department initially attempted to cover up Scott’s murder, claiming that the officer “feared for his life” after Scott struggled for his Taser. This account fell apart after footage taken

by a bystander emerged showing that Scott was unarmed and that the officer attempted to plant a weapon by his body.

Al Rogers, a former Waukegan school administrator and spokesman for the Howell family, has derided the “independence” of the investigation into Justus’ killing, stating, “We have no confidence in our local law enforcement agency [or] the major crimes task force. This is [a case of] police policing police.”

Rogers continued, “This young man was executed and at the end of the day, [the investigators] will probably fist-bump and go on to the next tragedy.”



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