

Illinois state attorney not pressing charges in Ronald Johnson killing

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In a press conference Monday, Anita Alvarez, Cook County state attorney, announced that no charges would be brought against George Hernandez, the Chicago police officer who shot and killed Ronald Johnson III, a 25-year-old man, in October 2014. In her 75-minute briefing, Alvarez showed footage of the killing from a police dashcam, previously barred from release, and sought to justify the state attorney office's decision.

The decision not to press charges against Hernandez comes amidst mass public outcry over the murder of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald by policeman Jason Van Dyke, also in October 2014. The video of McDonald being shot more than 14 times has been viewed more than a million times since it was released two weeks ago.

Alvarez's decision not to press charges against Hernandez for the shooting of Johnson came just three hours after a press conference by the Department of Justice announcing that it had opened a civil "pattern or practice investigation" into the Chicago Police Department (CPD). Also on Monday, the CPD chief of detectives resigned.

Johnson was killed by Hernandez on the night of October 12, 2014. He was shot twice, once in the knee and once in the shoulder. The autopsy report shows that the bullet that entered his shoulder pierced his jugular and then exited his eye socket, killing him.

Video from the police dashcam clearly shows Johnson sprinting away from police. Hernandez, the officer who killed Johnson, pulls up in an unmarked car. Within two seconds of exiting the car Hernandez quickly pulls out his firearm and shoots at Johnson five times, hitting him twice. Johnson is running in the opposite direction, posing no threat to Hernandez.

Earlier that night Johnson had been in his car with

another person when his rear window was shot out. According to the police, Johnson resisted arrest when they arrived on the scene. Johnson ran from police and was shot during that chase. Police have stated that Johnson was a known gang member.

Police claim that Johnson was wielding a pistol and pointed it "in the direction of pursuing officers." Johnson's family disputes this. Michael Oppenheimer, their lawyer, stated: "There was nothing in his hand, not a gun, a cellphone, a bottle of water—nothing."

The family has fought for the past year for the video footage to be released. Oppenheimer described the decision to not press charges as a "joke" and also said that he thought police gave statements only after watching the video, questioning their timeline.

Viewing the video on YouTube, which is of poor quality and not zoomed in on the murder, it is impossible to discern any weapon or object in Johnson's hands. In Alvarez's press conference she released stills from the video in which she claims a 9 mm pistol can be made out in Johnson's hand. These photos do not clearly delineate anything.

Johnson's family described the pistol presented for evidence by the Chicago Police Department as "old" and "rusty." They claim the police department planted it.

Alvarez, in her press conference, justified the police killing with the argument that Johnson was running towards a police vehicle that was "just arriving on the scene." (This vehicle is not seen on the dashcam). It stretches the imagination to state that Johnson, who is clearly depicted in the video trying to run away from the police as fast as he can, was actively seeking to run toward a police car and engage an officer.

The video shows Johnson virtually surrounded and trying to escape in the direction where there were the

fewest police forces. Similar to the police murder of Mario Woods in San Francisco on December 2, in which Woods was surrounded by police, Johnson's running away is characterized as a movement toward a policeman and therefore grounds for the police to shoot to kill.

In the DOJ's press conference announcing that it would investigate the Chicago Police Department for how it handles the use of deadly force, Attorney General Loretta Lynch stated, "This mistrust from members of the community makes it more difficult to gain help within investigations, to encourage the victims and the witnesses of crime to speak up and to fulfill the most basic responsibilities of public safety officials."

This comment points to public relations as the central reason behind the investigation. The Obama administration seeks to give people the impression that something is being done about the horrendous and colossal level of police violence in the country.

If the investigation of the CPD is similar to the DOJ's investigation of the Ferguson, Missouri Police Department, however, while the report may reveal widespread abuse, the government will still actively work to support the police force and its nonstop killings. The DOJ refused to bring charges against Darren Wilson for gunning down Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.

Indeed, the nonstop police killing incidents involving unarmed, fleeing and nonthreatening victims points to this not being a local issue of the Chicago PD, but rather a nationwide escalation of police violence against working class youth and the most marginalized sections of society.

In Chicago late Monday, city authorities released yet another video depicting police violence. Philip Coleman, a 38-year-old black man, died in police custody in December 2012. Coleman had been held in jail after allegedly assaulting his mother during a psychotic episode.

The video shows about six officers entering Coleman's cell and surrounding him as he lies on a cot. The video, which has no audio, appears to depict the officers shooting him with a stun gun before dragging his limp body out of the cell by his arms.

Coleman was brought to the hospital, where he was pronounced dead, due to a bad reaction to an

antipsychotic drug. An autopsy, however, showed he suffered severe trauma and had more than 50 bruises and abrasions on his body after the police encounter. Coleman's death was ruled an accident and an internal investigation found no wrongdoing on the part of police, who claimed they feared for their safety.

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who has come under fire for support for the Chicago Police Department's actions and subsequent cover-ups, was quick to speak out following the video's release and distance himself from the police officers' actions.

"I do not see how the manner in which Mr. Coleman was physically treated could possibly be acceptable," the mayor said in a statement. He added cynically, "Something is wrong here—either the actions of the officers who dragged Mr. Coleman, or the policies of the department."



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