

Pennsylvania constable shoots dead 12-year-old girl during home eviction

Tom Eley**14 January 2016**

On Monday morning a Pennsylvania state constable shot dead a 12-year-old girl while enforcing an eviction order on her family in rural Duncannon, near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The county coroner ruled the killing a homicide on Wednesday.

Constable Clarke Steele fired on the girl's father, Donald Bartho Meyer Jr., 57, who police claim had aimed a rifle at Steele. The bullet passed through the man's upper arm, shattering his bone, before striking the girl, Ciara Meyer, who was standing behind her father in the doorway. She was pronounced dead at the scene.

Donald Meyer was flown to Hershey Medical Center for his wound and is being held on charges of "making terroristic threats" as well as aggravated assault, simple assault and reckless endangerment. Steele, who was joined at the eviction by employees of the rental firm, has not been charged, and authorities have made no apology for the girl's death.

"Unfortunately, the constable was put into a situation where he had to defend himself," said State Police Trooper Robert T. Hicks. "Unfortunately, that little girl just happened to be behind her father at the time."

A web site set up in Meyer's memory describes her as having been "a loving vibrant 12 year old." She attended public school in the Susquenita School District. The school's superintendent said that counselors would be available to help children and staff deal with the loss.

"Very kind, sweet kid," a neighbor told ABC 27 News. "Here's a little girl that doesn't even have a chance to grow up and live her life, and all because of this senseless act. It's horrible, absolutely heartbreakin."

According to court documents, Donald Meyer owed \$1,780.85 to his landlord, Pfautz Rental, on a monthly

\$660 in rent.

The family was first delivered a court complaint on December 3. The court issued an order for possession on December 28, three days after Christmas, and this was served to Meyer at his home on December 30, two days before New Year's Day.

Constable Steele arrived on Monday morning with the intention of physically removing Meyer and his daughter, who was home sick from school on Monday. He had been sent "numerous times" to warn Meyer, Hicks said.

In his last visit, Steel had given the family a 10 a.m., January 11 move-out deadline. Steele's "lawful job, because he had a valid court order, was to remove them from the property if they had not already moved," Hicks added.

According to the police version of events, Steele approached the house in the morning. Donald Meyer closed the door on him and refused to talk. Steele, however, remained at the door of the house until Meyer returned and "engaged Constable Steele in a brief exchange of words."

Police claim that Meyer then "leveled a loaded .223 caliber rifle, which had been slung and concealed along his body, directly at Constable Steele with a point of aim at his chest." At this moment Steele fired at Meyer, police say, grazing his arm but striking directly the small child that stood behind him.

A search warrant issued after Ciara's killing found Donald Meyer's gun with a loaded chamber and a magazine clip holding 30 rounds. Police have not yet claimed that Meyer fired on Steele.

Constables are a low-level police force in Pennsylvania, technically under the governor. They receive no salary, but earn money by serving papers and other functions for district courts. Constables are

required to take only 80 hours of police training and supply their own equipment, including guns.

The tragedy in rural Pennsylvania combined at least two features of the American social crisis: police killings and home evictions.

Ciara is the 21st person and the first child to be killed by police in the US in 2016, according to a count kept by *The Guardian*. At least 1,200 Americans, the vast majority working class and poor, were killed by cops in 2015.

Evictions of poor and working class families are commonplace in “one of the worst affordable housing crises in generations,” according to Harvard University sociologist Matthew Desmond. In 2013, nearly 60 percent of all renter households spent more than 30 percent of their income on rent alone, and 30 percent of renters spent more than half of their income on rent. One in eight low-income families who rent could not afford to pay their landlords, and a similar number faced the possibility of eviction.

More recent data by real estate information firm Zillow found that the average renter now pays 30 percent or more of their income on rent—the threshold at which housing is considered unaffordable. While real wages continued to stagnate, rents rose by approximately 7 percent in 2014.

Courts dealing with eviction orders tend to show *less* mercy to families with children, such as the Meyers.

“Children do not shield families from eviction, but rather they often expose them to it,” Desmond wrote for the November 2015 issue of the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin. “If a tenant in eviction court lives with children, her or his odds of receiving an eviction judgment almost triple, even after taking into account how much is owed to the landlord, household income and several other key factors.”



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