

Six Baltimore police officers plead guilty to racketeering

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Eight of nine members of an elite Baltimore Police Department task force have been charged with crimes including robbery, extortion and fabricating evidence in a case which has exposed the sorts of brazen corruption and illegal practices which pervade police departments throughout the US.

Six of the eight pleaded guilty to racketeering and other charges last month. Two officers, Daniel Hersl and Marcus Taylor, are currently on trial in federal court facing robbery, extortion, and overtime fraud charges.

The charged officers were members of the now-defunct Gun Trace Task Force (GTTF), which was ostensibly set up in 2007 to focus on cracking down on illegal gun possession in order to reduce the number of guns in the city. Instead, the members of the group systematically violated the Constitutional rights of Baltimore's residents and used their authority to steal drugs and cash to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The leader of the task force, Wayne Jenkins, admitted in his plea agreement to numerous constitutional rights violations, including the regular use of GPS devices to track people he suspected of having cash, and entering their premises without a warrant in order to steal from them.

Jenkins also admitted to being involved in a scheme to plant drugs on an innocent man, stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars from Baltimore residents and providing cocaine and marijuana to an unidentified associate to resell on the streets. Jenkins split the profits of the drug sales, netting himself \$200,000 to \$250,000. Additionally, Jenkins admitted to stealing dirt bikes and reselling prescription drugs taken during the 2015 protests following the police murder of Freddie Gray.

On February 1, Donald Stepp, a Baltimore County bail bondsman, testified at the ongoing trial of Hersl and Taylor that in April 2015, during the protests, Jenkins walked into his garage carrying two garbage bags full of stolen pharmaceutical drugs. Stepp also testified that Jenkins made near-nightly trips to his home to drop off illegal drugs.

Jenkins also confessed to writing a false report about heroin planted in a car in 2010 following a high-speed police chase that killed an elderly bystander. The two men in the car spent years in prison because of the planted drugs before the task force's corruption emerged.

On January 23, Maurice Ward, one of the officers who pleaded guilty, testified on the first day of the trial that the officers in the task force would, on a nightly basis, prowl Baltimore's streets

trying to stir up trouble.

Ward testified that Jenkins would deliberately drive at fast speeds towards groups of people and then slam on the brakes. The task force members would then identify anyone who ran, and, without probable cause, give chase and then detain and search them. The officers had no legal basis to target people but were looking to provoke individuals who might have drugs or a gun into running. Ward estimated that the task force did this 10 to 20 times on slow nights and more than 50 times on busier nights.

Ward explained that the task force would also profile certain types of vehicles for traffic stops and pull them over on the basis of various pretexts, such as claiming that drivers weren't wearing seat belts or that windows were over-tinted. Ward said Jenkins would also ask suspected drug dealers to identify the biggest dealers in town and the task force members would use the information to target who to steal drugs and money from.

Furthermore, Ward testified that the task force members kept BB guns in their vehicles "in case we accidentally hit somebody or got into a shootout, so we could plant them." He also testified that Jenkins instructed the officers to carry replica guns to plant if they found themselves in a jam.

When Taylor was arrested last year, a replica gun was found in his glove box which was nearly indistinguishable from his service pistol.

In one of the more notorious incidents, GTTF members took a man's house keys, ran his name through databases to determine his address, and entered his home without a warrant. Once inside they cracked open a safe, finding about \$200,000. The officers took \$100,000, closed the safe, and then, in an effort to cover up their crime, filmed themselves pretending to open the safe for the first time. In the video, which was played at the trial, Jenkins is heard saying "Nobody touch anything."

After arresting the man, Jenkins listened to his calls from jail. The victim was heard discussing the police taking his money and stating that he wanted to hire a good lawyer to go after them. Jenkins determined that the man's wife was arranging his legal matters and decided to target her. He wrote a fraudulent note, purporting to be from another woman, saying that the man had gotten her pregnant, and left it in the man's door for the wife to find.

In yet another incident, GTTF officers robbed a small-time drug dealer, Sergio Summerville, at the storage unit where he lived. One of the officers falsely told Summerville they were with the Drug

Enforcement Administration and another falsely claimed they had a warrant to search his unit. The officers ended up taking thousands of dollars from Summerville and left without charging him with any crime. “They came at me like a gang,” he testified in court.

An employee of the storage facility testified that officers demanded access to the security camera system. When he correctly informed them that they needed a warrant, “They told me I was impeding a police investigation.” One of the officers also threatened the employee, saying he “looked like someone who needed to be robbed.” Another officer who has pleaded guilty, Evodio Hendrix, testified that “We would create false reports to cover up the robberies we were involved in.”

At trial, prosecutors introduced two bags of items that Jenkins accumulated for the GTTF to use in carrying out various robberies, including balaclava ski masks, black clothing and shoes, and tools such as a crow bar, battering ram, and a rope with a grappling hook.

In total, the task force is suspected of stealing at least \$300,000 in cash, three kilograms of cocaine, 43 pounds of marijuana, 800 grams of heroin, and jewelry worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

In addition to the widespread theft, members of the task force regularly filed for overtime pay that was unearned. One officer took a month off to remodel his home and was still paid. Another claimed overtime while on vacation in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.

In an indication that the corruption is far more widespread than the eight indicted officers, Ward testified that a lieutenant named Ian Dombroski would authorize eight hours of overtime pay that officers did not have to work, as a reward when officers recovered guns. Dombroski remains the head of the BPD’s Internal Affairs Section, overseeing investigations into allegations of wrongdoing by police officers.

Furthermore, Jenkins’ plea agreement states that “The practice at the GTTF [Gun Trace Task Force] was that if a sub-set of the GTTF had a gun arrest, all members of the GTTF, regardless of whether they had actually participated in the arrest, would submit individual overtime reports, as if they did.”

Already, prosecutors have been forced to drop hundreds of cases which relied on the word of the eight indicted officers. Baltimore’s public defender office notes that thousands of other cases have also been compromised. It is likely that hundreds or thousands of innocent people were convicted based on the actions, statements, and/or testimony of the task force members.

Far from a unique event, these indictments are only the latest revelation of unconstitutional and abusive police practices in Baltimore. Following the Freddie Gray protests the Department of Justice (DOJ) undertook a review which found widespread violations of constitutional rights.

After examining police stops, arrests and court documents from 2010-2016, the DOJ found that Baltimore police officers routinely engaged in unjustified stops and searches, arrests without cause, racial profiling, use of excessive force, sexual discrimination, and retaliation against actions protected by the First Amendment, including detaining and arresting people simply because they used

speech perceived to be critical or disrespectful towards the police.

Furthermore, since November 2016, there have been three separate documented incidents involving the fraudulent use of body cameras by Baltimore police officers. In the first incident, police are shown searching the driver’s area of a vehicle and not finding anything suspicious. The officers then turned off their body cameras. When they later turned the cameras back on, an officer almost immediately pulled a bag of alleged drugs out of the driver’s area of the car.

In an incident recorded in January 2017, a police officer is seen placing a bag of alleged drugs among debris in a backyard lot, walking out to the street, activating his body camera and then returning to the alley and recovering the same bag as two other officers look on.

A third incident recorded in June and reported to prosecutors in August involved a Baltimore police officer who allegedly “self-reported” footage from his body-camera as a “re-enactment of the seizure of evidence.” As a result of these incidents, dozens of cases involving the officers who have manipulated their body cameras have either been dropped or are under review.

The series of incidents in the past few years in Baltimore exposes in microcosm the contempt that the police have for the constitutional rights of the working class throughout the country. While organizations such as Black Lives Matter and others tied to the Democratic Party seek various reforms to unconstitutional police actions, such as body cameras, oversight boards, and the hiring of more minority police officers, the events in Baltimore show the hollowness of such efforts.

Not only does Baltimore have one of the most racially-integrated police forces in the US, with over half the police force non-white, but five of the eight officers charged from the GTTF are black. Furthermore, as the three recent incidents involving body cameras show, this “solution” in no way solves the root problem of unconstitutional and violent actions by police. Fundamentally, the police are an instrument of class repression operating, regardless of their race, in the interests of the wealthy.



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