

Two Baltimore police officers convicted of racketeering, robbery and fraud

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Two Baltimore police officers were convicted in federal court on Monday of racketeering, robbery and fraud associated with their activities working for the now-defunct Gun Trace Task Force (GTTF), supposedly tasked with reducing the number of illegal guns in Baltimore.

Daniel Hersl and Marcus Taylor, along with six others who pled guilty to racketeering charges last month, engaged in a wide range of criminal and unconstitutional activity, including repeated armed home invasions of city residents, where they stole money, drugs and guns, only to resell the drugs and guns on the streets.

In addition, these thugs with badges routinely planted guns on innocent residents, chased and searched people without probable cause, and lied under oath, leading to the conviction of innocent people. The Baltimore Public Defenders Office believes there may be over 3,000 tainted cases dating to 2008 because of the involvement of the convicted officers. To date about 125 cases have been dropped.

Debbie Katz Levi, head of special litigation for Baltimore's Office of the Public Defender, told the Associated Press, "Beyond the sheer credibility issues that should have been raised at the time, given how embedded their crimes were in their police work, all cases involving these officers are tainted."

One of the victims of the GTTF, Andre Crowder, was wrongly pulled over in 2016 by three of the now convicted officers. On February 2, Crowder told a press conference at his attorney's office that the officers pulled him over for an alleged seat belt violation, then searched his car, finding a gun. The officers then proceeded to his home, where they took \$10,000 from him. He was jailed for three days before he could post bail. During that time, his three-year-old son passed

away.

"It's bigger than the charge they put on me," Crowder said. "The mark they put on my record, the cash that was took, all of that, it doesn't matter, because I wasn't there to spend the last moments of my son's life with him because of this situation."

Another victim, Jamal Walker, described a 2011 encounter with the convicted leader of the GTTF, Wayne Jenkins. Walker was sitting in his vehicle when Jenkins and a partner told him to get out. Inside, Walker had \$40,000 in cash; only \$20,000 was reported seized by the officers. "The more it went on, the worse it got," Walker said. He said the officers thought "like cowboys—we do what we want to do."

All told, the eight convicted members of the now-defunct GTTF stole more than \$300,000 in cash, three kilograms of cocaine, 43 pounds of marijuana, 800 grams of heroin, and jewelry worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

At the trial of Hersl and Taylor, the leader of the GTTF, Wayne Jenkins, was described as a violent and corrupt officer who led the unit on a continuous quest to shake down city residents and find big-time drug dealers with assets to steal.

Jenkins also stole and sold prescription drugs that were taken during the protests that erupted following the 2015 police murder of Freddie Gray. At the time, police blamed the drugs recirculated by Jenkins for a sharp increase in murders. Prosecutors also introduced two bags of items that Jenkins accumulated for the GTTF to use in 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 further testimony at the trial, a dozen other officers and an assistant state's attorney were accused of

engaging in similar criminal activities or helping to cover them up as they interacted with the convicted officers. The accused include the head of the police department's Internal Affairs, an officer who investigates robberies, and another assigned to the police training academy. A fourth accused officer, Sean Suitor, was a city homicide detective who was fatally shot with his own gun under mysterious circumstances the day before he was to testify before a federal grand jury in the case involving the GTTF. Many of the accused officers remain on the job.

Not surprisingly, Baltimore's mayor and police commissioner have both tried to paint the latest revelations of police corruption as "a few bad apples." The usual whitewash investigations and "anti-corruption" units have been promised to supposedly "clean up" the department and ensure that similar incidents do not happen again. None of these promises should be taken seriously.

In 2016, the Obama Justice Department released a report showing that Baltimore police engaged in widespread violations of constitutional rights, including 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 by officers to be critical or disrespectful towards the police.

The Justice Department report stated: "There is reasonable cause to believe that BPD [Baltimore Police Department] engages in a pattern or practice of conduct that violates the Constitution or federal law." More specifically, the 2016 report noted, "During stops, BPD officers frequently pat-down or frisk individuals as a matter of course, without identifying necessary grounds to believe that the person is armed and dangerous. And even where an initial frisk is justified, we found that officers often violate the Constitution by exceeding the frisk's permissible scope. We likewise found many instances in which officers strip search individuals without legal justification. In some cases, officers performed degrading strip searches in public, prior to making an arrest, and without grounds to believe that the searched individuals were concealing contraband on their bodies."

The revelations of the extreme corruption of the

GTTF police officers fit into the pattern, established in the Justice Department report, of a police department that systematically stampedes on the basic constitutional rights of Baltimore's working-class residents. Only a mass political movement against capitalism, based in the working class, can put an end to these rampant violations of fundamental democratic rights.



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