

Anger mounts over video of police beating unarmed man in North Carolina

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Police body camera video published by the *Asheville Citizen Times* on Wednesday has caused widespread public outcry over the beating and torture of an African American man accused of jaywalking and trespassing in a vacant parking lot in Asheville, North Carolina last year by white police officers.

On August 24, Johnnie Rush was on his way home from a 13-hour shift as a dishwasher at a local Cracker Barrel restaurant shortly after midnight when he was stopped by two police officers. The video shows Verino Ruggiero, then an officer-in-training, confronting the 33-year-old Rush for allegedly walking through the parking lot of a business that was closed for the night, and failing to use a crosswalk while crossing the street near a baseball stadium.

In the video, Ruggiero can be seen telling Rush that he had failed to use a crosswalk four times, to which Rush replies, “All I’m trying to do is go home, man. I’m tired. I just got off work.”

Ruggiero then says, “I’ve got two options: I can either arrest you or write you a ticket.”

Rush responds, “It doesn’t matter to me, man. Do what you’ve got to do, besides keep harassing me,” before cursing in frustration.

At this point, Officer Christopher Hickman, who was training Ruggiero, tells Rush to put his hands behind his back. Fearing what would come next, Rush fled from the officers. During the ensuing chase, Hickman can be heard yelling, “You are going to get fucked up hardcore,” while pulling out his stun gun.

Rush told the *Citizen Times* that he then stopped, before being tackled to the ground by the officers. Hickman proceeded to savagely beat Rush, slamming his face on the pavements and repeatedly punching his head, while Ruggiero pinned him to the ground. In the video, Rush can be heard telling the officers he can’t

breathe several times and crying out in agony as he was beaten, choked, and shocked twice with a TASER.

Upon arriving at the scene, Sergeant Lisa Taube, the supervising officer responsible for taking Rush’s statement, reportedly accused Rush of lying about the beating repeatedly before finally calling an ambulance to take the injured man to a nearby hospital. The body camera footage shows Hickman telling Taube that Rush had laughed and taunted the officers, and “wanted to fight,” even reaching for Hickman’s TASER at one point. The video provides no evidence to support any of these claims.

At the hospital, Hickman verbally abused Rush and used racial slurs against him.

Police records indicate that Rush was later charged with impeding traffic, second-degree trespass, resisting a public officer, and assault on a government official, though these charges were eventually dismissed.

Hickman was forced to resign in January and is currently under criminal investigation for second-degree assault. An internal police investigation found that Hickman had used excessive force during the incident. The investigation also found that Hickman had engaged in “rude and discourteous behavior” on at least four other occasions. Sergeant Taube was disciplined for “unsatisfactory performance” after failing to disclose information she obtained during her interview with Rush and to review body camera footage that day.

A request made by Police Chief Tammy Hooper for the State Bureau of Investigation to investigate the beating of Johnnie Rush was rejected.

While the Federal Bureau of Investigation announced Wednesday that it had opened an investigation of Hickman’s actions, Ruggiero is reportedly not being investigated in connection with Rush’s beating and

arrest.

Although the beating occurred in August, the public was not informed of the incident until a source provided the body camera footage to the *Citizen Times* this week. According to North Carolina state law, such police footage is not part of the public record and can only be obtained and published with a court order. Someone who is captured on a police cam can request to view it in private but cannot publish the footage.

City Councilwoman Sheneika Smith told the *New York Times* that she recognized Rush from her work with the nonprofit Green Opportunities, which provides job training. Smith described Rush as hardworking and eager to learn, with an interest in construction and carpentry.

“He was looking for opportunities to gain more skills so he could qualify for higher-paying jobs,” Smith said of his time at Green Opportunities.

The incident and attempted police cover-up has caused widespread outrage in the working-class Appalachian community of 90,000, prompting Chief Hooper to offer her resignation. Hooper previously drew public protest last year over her request for an additional \$1 million to hire more officers to police the downtown area.

This incident again highlights the impunity under which police agencies operate in the United States, where 1,192 people were murdered by the police last year and this year another 228 as of March 7, an average of more than three killings every day.



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