

University of Chicago student with mental illness shot by campus police

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On Tuesday night, University of Chicago campus police shot 21-year-old student Charles Thomas as he displayed signs of a severe mental breakdown. The shooting takes place amid a growing mental health crisis among college students and the violent response of the campus police exposes the increasing brutality of life in the United States.

The shooting took place late Tuesday night after the University of Chicago Police Department (UCPD) received reports of a burglary in an affluent section of the Hyde Park neighborhood, where the University of Chicago campus is located. According to the university police, Thomas was seen carrying a long metal bar and breaking car and apartment windows.

The campus police vehicle dashboard camera footage as well as the body camera footage of the officer show a clearly disturbed young man. The campus officer pulls up to him and yells “mental” and exits the car.

The body camera shows Thomas walking towards the officer while yelling at him. The officer yells back, “Don’t come at me,” and then fires a shot at Thomas, who falls to the ground screaming. According to the Chicago Police Department (CPD) report, Thomas was struck in his shoulder and then taken to Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

While Thomas has survived the incident, he is now charged by the CPD for aggravated assault and misdemeanor counts of criminal damage to property.

Speaking to the student newspaper the *Chicago Maroon*, Thomas’ mother Kathleen Thomas said that she believes her son was having a major psychiatric episode. While her son has not had a history of mental illness, the family has had a history of bipolar disorders. According to his mother, such disorders can manifest themselves at the young man’s age.

She told the *Maroon*, “That was not the Charles I

know. All through him growing up and his teenage years, I’ve only seen him get slightly angry a couple times. He never had to go to the principal’s office ever, never had any run-ins with the law.”

Thomas was studying political science in his fourth year at the elite research institution in Chicago’s South Side neighborhood of Hyde Park. Thomas’ mother suspects that he had a breakdown under the immense stress of trying to complete a bachelor’s thesis for his major. She added, “He’s always put a lot of pressure on himself to be successful.” According to her, “something must have made him snap,” noting that he did not get much sleep.

Thomas’ mother, while grateful her son was not killed, asked if there were other means of de-escalating the situation. “I realize it was a very tense situation,” she told the *Maroon*. “I do sort of wonder: Were there alternative methods that could have been used other than using bullets to handle the situation? I’m not sure exactly what the policy is, or what the training is, but in the video they used the word ‘mental’; so they realized that he was having a mental health episode. If they realized that, was there a different way to handle it so he didn’t get shot?”

The official response of the University has largely been to defend the actions of the campus police. “Maintaining our community’s safety, security and well-being is of paramount importance,” said President Robert J. Zimmer in an official press release.

The response among faculty, students and much of the population has been one of horror. Thomas’ professor, Guy Emerson Mount, tweeted, “Charles Thomas was shot Tuesday night by the University of Chicago’s police force. He is a student in my class. I know him as thoughtful and gentle. Today I have to face his classmates and explain why I work at an

institution that shot their friend for having a mental health crisis.” Protests by students took place Thursday night on campus.

The University of Chicago, one of the most expensive schools in the country, is guarded tightly by the campus police and surrounded by a sea of poverty and social breakdown. The surrounding neighborhoods of Woodlawn and Englewood have high rates of poverty, unemployment and violence as a result of decades of deindustrialization, job losses and a social counterrevolution carried out by the ruling class against the working class across the country.

The UCPD is one of the largest private security forces in the world—something which the University brags about—with nearly 100 or so officers. Ominously, according to a 2014 *Vice.com* report, this private security force has jurisdiction over 65,000 people, 50,000 of whom are not campus residents. With the passing of the Illinois Private Campus Police Act of 1992, the UCPD has been given full policing powers, including the ability to search, ticket, arrest or detain anyone within their jurisdiction.

The UCPD has a history of racial profiling of African-American working-class youth who enter the neighborhood, as well as students on campus. The UCPD is entirely non-transparent about its profiling activities, including the number of times officers engage in anti-democratic stop-and-frisk practices that terrorize the population. As a private security force, the UCPD is not beholden to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. Detectives in the UCPD have previously spied on student protests, with one officer posing as a protester in 2013.

Since 2005, there have been 160 complaints against the UCPD, according to a 2018 report produced by the Independent Review Committee, an organization composed of faculty, students and community members. While the committee is capable of reviewing complaints, it is largely powerless to enforce any changes. Many complaints have also been dismissed as unfounded without much of an investigation.

The shooting of Charles Thomas takes place amid a reign of police violence across the country, with thousands of workers and youth targeted by the police. With unprecedented levels of social inequality and social tension building up in the United States, thousands of people have been killed in the past two

decades by the police. College campuses have also become increasingly militarized, with the intelligence agencies and Pentagon forming partnerships with higher education institutions.

More and more, young people face enormous debts just to attend college, with total student loan debt skyrocketing to nearly \$1.4 trillion. Young people, including many of the non-tenured faculty at institutions like the University of Chicago, face bleak job prospects and meager living conditions. Millennial students, even well-off middle-class students, face intense pressures to finish college, leaving them with crippling student loan debts and no guarantee of a decent job or a future.

Under the weight of these social and economic pressures, undergraduate and graduate students as well as working class youth are experiencing increasing rates of depression, anxiety, bipolar disorders and other forms of mental illnesses. A 2016 UCLA report found that nearly 12 percent of freshmen are “frequently depressed.” According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, 33 percent of students have considered suicide.



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