

Two police killings in Billings, Montana in two days

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Billings, Montana police shot and killed two people earlier this week, Zachary Glen Hoven, 29, and Shawn Michael Hubbard, 44. The two shootings occurred on April 9 and 10, respectively, and no one else has been reported injured from either incident. They were the 352nd and 354th people killed by police this year nationwide and among the more than 20 people shot dead by police in past week.

In the first instance, police responded to a 911 call reporting that Hoven was erratically slashing a knife at various objects in his unit at the Sandra Apartments, at one point breaking his window. It was also reported that he was also shouting various phrases, including “God will forgive me,” among other things that were unintelligible. There was no other person in the room and it did not appear that anyone else was in danger before the police arrived.

When the police initially approached the building, according to the official report, Hoven threw three knives at police, all of which missed, and the officers responded with a Taser, which apparently had no effect. When the police entered the building and demanded Hoven’s surrender, he reportedly burst out of his apartment and advanced on the officers, still brandishing a knife. The two lead officers, Brian Weaver and Jairo Solorio, fired on Hoven simultaneously, Solorio using a Taser and Weaver firing three shots. Hoven died from his injuries at the Billings Clinic.

There has been so far no comment from the Billings Police Department as to why the officers chose both a nonlethal and lethal option to subdue Hoven. Billings Police Chief Rich St. John defended Weaver, claiming that even with access to Tasers a man with a knife was a “lethal scenario” for the officers.

The second shooting occurred at Lucky Lil’s Casino.

Police initially responded to a call early Tuesday morning about a man with a gun involved in a domestic dispute with his ex-wife, banging on her door and windows. By the time the police arrived, Hubbard had left, and his ex-wife informed them that Hubbard announced he was going to rob a casino.

Police then began canvassing the area for Hubbard and encountered him in the Lucky Lil’s parking lot, reportedly ordering him to stop. Hubbard didn’t listen and continued into the casino. When the officers finally entered the casino itself, being forced to break a window to enter because they were apparently not allowed into the building by the staff quickly enough, they reported seeing Hubbard waving a gun around and threatening to take hostages.

After Hubbard ignored verbal orders to disarm, Sergeant Bret Becker opened fire with his AR-15 assault rifle—the same weapon used to gun down 17 people during the Parkland, Florida school shooting—hitting Hubbard twice in the chest. Becker fired again while Hubbard, who was reportedly reaching for his weapon, was on the ground. The weapon later was determined to be a pellet gun, which police claim “looked exactly like a black, semi-automatic handgun.”

Hubbard was known previously to police, having criminal convictions of drug use and theft. At the same time, he may have been mentally ill, with one witness at the casino saying on Facebook that Hubbard’s actions indicated that he wanted to be shot by the police.

All the officers involved in both shootings have been placed on leave with pay, pending an internal investigation and investigation by the Montana Department of Justice’s criminal division. There will also be a review by a jury during a coroner’s inquest,

which is required by Montana law. So far, there are no videos or photos that have been released from the incidents, including the body cam photos from the officers that will be viewed for the investigation.

Of the recent cases involving police shootings in Billings, four (including the two most recent) are still being investigated while eight have been declared “justified.” Given the pattern in Billings and nationally, it is likely that these killer cops will also avoid charges.

These are the eleventh and twelfth police killings in Billings, a city of 110,000, in the past six years. Two more people were shot by police but survived. According to toxicology reports, the majority of those previously killed were under the influence of methamphetamines. While this class of drug is less used nationally, it is the most commonly used illegal drug in Montana because it is inexpensive and more widely available in the US northwest. Toxicology reports for the two most recent victims of the Billings police have not yet been released, though it is suspected that Hubbard may have been under the influence of opiates when he was shot.

The erratic behavior by both Hoven and Hubbard also suggests that these police killings are among the many that involve officers responding to incidents where their victims were likely mentally disturbed. A report from 2016 by the Ruderman Family Foundation reveals that about half of the people that die at the hands of the police have some form of disability, either physical or mental. It reveals the fact that police are being more and more deployed to deal with those in need of medical treatment, not actual criminals.

These police killings also demonstrate yet again that the fundamental issue of police killings in America is not race, but class. In both cases, the victims were white and from working class backgrounds, which account for the largest number of police killings in the country.



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