

Former Texas police officer found guilty of murdering unarmed teen

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In an unusual outcome, Roy Oliver, a former Balch Springs, Texas police officer, was convicted this week of murder in the shooting death of Jordan Edwards, an unarmed black 15-year-old who was leaving a party in April 2017.

The shooting came after Oliver and his partner, Tyler Gross, had broken up the party. Both officers were inside the home where the party had been taking place when they heard gunfire outside. Authorities later determined the shots were fired in the air by gang members in a nearby parking lot. Footage from the officers' body cameras showed a chaotic scene unfolding, with teenagers running throughout the streets.

At that point Edwards got into a car with his brothers and two friends in order to leave the area. Gross approached the vehicle. Oliver retrieved his rifle and went toward Gross, who was ordering the car carrying Edwards to stop. Oliver said that he saw the car back up and stop for a second before moving forward and going toward Gross.

Gross walked to the passenger side door of the vehicle and broke the back window as he yelled, "Stop the fucking car." Oliver then approached and fired five rounds in less than one second into the car full of teenagers. One of the shots struck Edwards in the head as he warned others to get down. He died immediately.

Oliver, who had been a police officer for six years, was fired two days after the shooting. He had been disciplined once before for losing his temper with an assistant district attorney during a trial.

Oliver told jurors that he had "no choice" to fire into the car full of teenagers because he feared for his partner's life. Police initially said the vehicle backed up toward officers "in an aggressive manner." However, the Balch Springs Police Department later

confirmed, after watching body cam footage of the incident, that the car was in fact moving away from Oliver and his partner.

Oliver testified during the trial that he opened fire after seeing the car move toward his partner. However, his partner told jurors he did not fear for his life.

Defense attorneys attempted to use the fact that Oliver had also been responding to reports of underage drinking to justify the killing. Yet an autopsy report revealed that Edwards was not drinking at the party. Furthermore, law enforcement officials confirmed no other teens were drinking or doing drugs at the house party either.

In closing arguments, defense attorneys told jurors they needed to evaluate the circumstances from Oliver's viewpoint and from what he knew of the situation at the time. Prosecutors responded that Oliver was an angry "out of control" walking-bomb, looking for a reason to kill, and stating his decision to fire was unreasonable.

Police officers in the US have a multitude of protections preventing them from being subject to criminal cases and almost always get away with assault and murder. It is extremely rare for an officer to go to trial, and even rarer that they are found guilty.

According to criminologist Phil Stinson, a professor at Bowling Green State University in Kentucky who tracks police misconduct, only six non-federal police officers have been convicted in similar cases since 2005. Meanwhile police kill approximately 1,000 people every single year.

"For an officer to be convicted of murder resulting from an on-duty shooting, the facts of the incident have to be so bizarre that there is no rational explanation for the officer's actions," Stinson told the Associated Press. "I think that shooting into a car full of teenagers as they slowly drive down the street away from the

officer fits that pattern.”

Jordan Edwards’ father, Odell Edwards, briefly spoke outside the courtroom before heading back in to begin listening to the sentencing phase of the trial, saying he was thankful for the decision of the jury.

“I just want to say I’m happy, very happy,” he said, adding that it’s “been a long time” since he felt that way.

Last year, Lee Merritt, a lawyer representing the Edwards family, noted that it had been more than 40 years since a police officer in Texas was convicted for murder. Prior to this year, the last conviction took place in 1973.



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