

Minneapolis police officer convicted of murdering Justine Damond

Anthony Bertolt
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After a month-long trial a jury handed down a decision Tuesday, finding former Minneapolis Police officer 33-year-old Mohamed Noor guilty of murdering 40-year-old Justine Ruszczyk Damond in 2017.

Noor was convicted of third-degree murder and involuntary manslaughter and found not guilty of second-degree murder in a rare conclusion to a police killing in the United States. The verdict carries a maximum sentence of 25 years in prison for third degree murder and an additional 10 year maximum for second degree manslaughter.

Damond was shot and killed by Noor on July 15, 2017 after she called 911 twice to report a suspected rape in the alley behind her home. Noor, along with his partner at the time, Matthew Harrity, responded to the call and drove through the alley behind Damond's home with the lights on their squad car off and their body cameras not recording. Both officers say that they heard a loud noise, presumably Damond's hand on the roof of their car, drew their guns, and Noor fired across Harrity, hitting Damond and killing her.

Immediately following the shooting, the Minneapolis police department stonewalled investigators for a year until Hennepin County Attorney Mike Freeman pushed to press criminal charges against Noor.

During the trial, Noor's defense stated that both he and Harrity had feared for their lives after hearing a loud sound. According to local newspaper *Star Tribune*, Noor testified in his defense that he "fired one shot" and that "the threat was gone," adding that "she could have had a weapon."

Prosecutors argued that Noor acted unreasonably, firing at a shadowy figure without any verbal warning. Additionally, countering the claims that she had placed her hand on the top of their squad car, investigators found no fingerprints on the vehicle.

Since the conclusion of Noor's trial, various political figures and mainstream media have sought to portray the trial and verdict as being racially motivated, since Noor, who is the first Somali-American police officer in his precinct, had shot and killed Damond, an Australian-American white woman.

Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey attempted to remove the murder of Damond from the context of police murder in America and paint it as a racial issue, stating "Our city must come together – not for any single person, entity, or organization – not for any reason beyond our love for each other and the values that hold us together." He added "Let me be clear, we will stand with our Somali community. We will stand together for the city we love."

Most notably, Nekima Levy Armstrong, a leading figure in Minneapolis' Black Lives Matter organization, sought to portray the conviction of Noor exclusively in racial terms, covering up the fundamental social function of the police. "This is an isolated case with an isolated result based on racial dynamics and affluence of the victim, not to mention the race of the officer," she said. "I'm not going to pretend that this is about justice."

Nothing could be further from the truth about Noor's trial and police murder in America, especially considering that immediately following the shooting of Damond, police searched her entire home for any evidence that could justify her murder—the same treatment that many victims of police shootings receive. It was only the egregious circumstances in Damond's murder that made it difficult to justify her killing and avoid a trial.

Just six months ago, Jason Van Dyke, a white police officer who shot and killed 15-year-old Laquan McDonald in 2014, who was black, was convicted of

second-degree murder and 16 counts of aggravated battery with a firearm in Chicago.

Despite these recent convictions, police in the US are rarely ever charged with any crime in cases where they have killed civilians. From 2005 to 2017, out of almost 12,000 cases where civilians were killed by police, only 80 officers were charged, and out of those charged, only 30 were found guilty.

The reality is that the police in America, regardless of their skin color, ethnicity or national origin have been trained to treat the working class and poor as hostile and to see themselves as an occupying military force. The ruling class depends on militarized police to defend historic levels of social inequality, where only 3 billionaires own as much wealth as half of the population.

In contrast to comments from Levy Armstrong, Damond's family welcomed the verdict, adding additional criticisms of the Minneapolis Police Department's refusal to cooperate with the investigation into the shooting.

Speaking at a press conference following the verdict, Damond's father, John Rusczyk, said "We would like to note that we believe the conviction was reached despite the active resistance of a number of Minneapolis officers, including the head of their union and either active resistance or gross incompetence of the [Bureau of Criminal Apprehension], particularly at the beginning of the investigation."

Rusczyk expressed his family's hope that the verdict in Noor's case will shift the outcomes in future police murder cases. "We hope this will be a catalyst for future change," he told the press.

In a vigil held following Damond's murder in 2017, Valerie Castile, the mother of Philando Castile, an African American man who was murdered in the suburb of Falcon Heights by officer Jeronimo Yanez in 2016, expressed her solidarity with Damond's family and all families of police murder victims. "No life is any different than the other. It's a tragedy that we lost our loved ones to someone who is supposed to protect and serve," she said.

At least 315 people have been already been shot and killed by police across the United States in 2019, according to a tally of press reports maintained by the *Washington Post*.



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