

Baltimore police officer shoots man dead, injures another after nuisance call

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On the night of Saturday, May 17, a Baltimore County police officer shot two people at the Cove Village town home complex in Essex, Maryland. The police department confirmed that Robert Johnson Jr., 29, died from his injuries. Johnson's 20-year-old brother, Freddie Jackson, was also shot by police and suffered non-life-threatening injuries during the incident.

Johnson, an expectant father whose friends and family said lived by the motto of "family first," had been celebrating the 15th birthday of a cousin when police arrived. According to eye-witness reports published by the *Baltimore Sun*, Johnson had gotten into a minor traffic incident with a neighbor when police responded to a noise complaint that had been made about a crowd gathered in the parking lot.

According to officer Jennifer Peach, a county police spokeswoman, the crowd had largely dispersed by the time the police arrived. The first responding officer "was confronted with an armed suspect and discharged his weapon." Johnson had apparently exited a car brandishing a gun when he was shot. He died after being taken to the hospital, and a gun was recovered at the scene, Peach said. The police officer who shot Johnson and Jackson, identified as Police Officer First Class Knight, a 24-year veteran, has been placed on routine administrative leave.

However, the official statements given by the county police have been contradicted by the accounts of several neighbors who witnessed the shooting. Kayla Stokes, a neighbor, told the *Sun* she was sitting near her window when she observed a police car pull up near a group of about 10 neighborhood children and teenagers. According to Stokes, the officer immediately pointed his flashlight and gun at the group and began shooting and chasing them within a minute or two. The man

holding a weapon threw it down and ran away.

Regarding the officer, "He didn't wait. He just started shooting. I told my child's father, 'They shooting him for no reason.' Police seen him throw it down. ... I don't understand why he would shoot him in the back. It was clear as day he was running away from him." Stokes disputed the police department's statement that the crowd had dispersed before the officer arrived: "Any of them young kids could've got shot. They were hiding behind freakin' cars."

Stokes condemned the police shooting as unjustifiable, "The police had no right to do what they did to that boy at all. Now, some mother doesn't get to kiss their kid goodnight. That's all I could think about."

Stokes' version of events was supported by others. LaKisha Chase, mother of one of the victims, told the *Sun* that she had witnessed Johnson exiting his vehicle with his hands up when a firearm fell from his car. "Shots were fired as soon as she heard Johnson's gun hit the pavement," the *Sun* wrote.

Another neighbor, a 46-year-old woman, was awoken by the sound of gunshots. When she opened her door moments later, she found a bleeding young man sprawled over her front steps, and police officers with guns drawn shouted at her to "Close the fucking door!" The woman, who declined to give her name out of fear for her safety, added, "I have a 5-year-old. She saw that. She's distraught. She was crying, upset, shaking all night."

The recklessness of the officer's shooting spree is further shown by noting that Jackson, the second victim, was shot while *inside* a nearby house.

According to the *Sun*: "Johnson's younger brother ... was inside their home with several children who watched the incident from their front window. ...

Freddie Jackson was trying to escort the children upstairs when one of Knight's bullets pierced the door frame and hit the 20-year-old in the leg, relatives said. The children carried the man upstairs and applied a tourniquet to his leg using a T-shirt..."

The Baltimore Police Department has a long history of abuses, outright corruption, and a callous disregard for the lives of ordinary working class people. Last month marked the five-year anniversary of the killing of Freddie Gray. On April 12, 2015, Gray was arrested and charged with possessing a knife. He was given a "rough ride" in the police van and died a week later of a severed spinal cord. Mass protests erupted in the city over the mishandling of the case, prompting the governor of Maryland to impose martial law and deploy the National Guard in the streets of Baltimore.

In response to the nationwide outpouring of popular anger, the federal DOJ was ordered to conduct an investigation into the practices of the Baltimore Police Department. The investigation concluded that Baltimore police routinely violated the civil rights of city residents. The abuses included unjustified stops and searches; arrests without proper cause; racial profiling; use of excessive force; sexual discrimination; and retaliation against actions protected by the First Amendment.

Despite the uncovering of these routine abuses, all officers involved in Gray's murder were cleared of all charges by state and federal prosecutors.

In July 2017, bodycam footage revealed that a police officer had planted drugs, sending an innocent man to jail. In August, video footage was released which showed several officers colluding to plant drugs during a traffic stop. As a result, 41 drug and gun cases that relied on the officers' testimony were dropped.

In February 2018, two Baltimore police officers were convicted of racketeering, robbery and fraud. The two officers, along with at least six others, were involved in a wide range of criminal activity, which included repeated armed home invasions of city residents where they stole money, drugs and guns. The drugs and guns were later sold on the streets.

In November of last year, three men were exonerated after a wrongful murder conviction, which came about as a result of coerced evidence. They had already served 36 years behind bars. The men were just teenagers when they were arrested in 1983, when they

walked out of prison they were in their 50s.

This sampling of cases is merely the tip of the iceberg of corruption and abuse of power that occurs within police forces in Baltimore and more generally. According to killedbypolice.net, police in the United States have killed at least 376 people so far this year.

The latest string of killings in the United States includes the February 23 killing of Ahmaud Arbery. Arbery was chased down and shot dead by a former police officer and his son while out on a jog, and local authorities subsequently attempted to cover it up. Only with the release of dashcam footage of the killing and growing popular outrage, did the police finally arrest the killers in early May.

On May 7, protests broke out in Indianapolis over police killings the previous night. In three separate incidents, two men were shot dead and a pregnant woman was struck and killed by a police car. In New York City, video footage showing the brutal arrests of people for violating the social distancing ordinance has sparked outrage.

The barbarism and backwardness pervading police departments across America and the corruption of a legal system that tolerates it, is undoubtedly a symptom of the advanced breakdown of society under a decaying capitalist system.



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