

Newly released body camera footage shows Baltimore police shooting man in the back

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Body camera footage has been released regarding the May 16 killing of a 29-year-old African American man by a Baltimore County police officer. Robert Johnson, an expectant father, was gunned down by Police Officer First Class Knight at a townhome complex in Essex, Maryland.

Police were responding to a noise complaint about a group of youth gathered in the parking lot. Johnson had been celebrating a cousin's fifteenth birthday when he dented a neighbor's car while trying to park. According to witnesses, although Johnson offered to pay for repairs, the argument escalated. The neighbor called police and informed them that Johnson was armed.

The body camera footage released last week showed that Knight approached Johnson's car and asked for identification. As Johnson stepped out of his vehicle, a handgun could be seen falling to the ground. When Johnson appeared to stoop to pick it up, Knight immediately drew his weapon and opened fire.

Johnson began to flee, and screaming could be heard in the background as Knight called for backup. Knight chased after Johnson and continued shooting wildly, striking him in the back. Johnson fell to the ground, and the officer fired two more shots at him before he put his hands in the air. Johnson later died of his wounds in a hospital.

Baltimore County Deputy State's Attorney Robin Coffin told the *Baltimore Sun* that her office had reviewed all of the statements from witnesses, neighbors and police, and that authorities had determined that "this is a justified shooting when Mr. Johnson reached for that handgun."

Coffin claimed that Johnson had pointed the handgun at Knight and cited a finger injury on Johnson as proof. Despite the Baltimore County police's claim to self-defense, the video footage contradicts these statements.

At no point in the video was Johnson seen pointing the gun at Knight. In fact, Johnson had his back to the officer from beginning to end. That all bullet wounds were in Johnson's back testifies to the blatant inconsistencies in the statements of the authorities.

Neighbors who witnessed the shooting described it as senseless and expressed outrage over the recklessness of the officer's actions. Johnson's brother, 20-year-old Freddie Jackson, was wounded in the burst of gunfire. According to the *Sun*, Jackson was inside his home with several children as they watched the incident unfold.

When the shooting began, Jackson began to herd the children to safety upstairs when one of Knight's bullets pierced the doorframe and struck him in the leg. The children helped him up the stairs and applied a tourniquet to his leg. Baltimore County Police Chief Melissa Hyatt admitted, "it's incredibly concerning" that Jackson was shot while inside his home as a result of "split-second decisions" taken by Knight. Although Knight was initially placed on administrative leave, he has since resumed patrol duties in the area.

Johnson's relatives have hired a lawyer and are calling for a grand jury to review the case. Baltimore Attorney Warren Brown called the decision not to pursue charges against Knight "inappropriate."

In a statement to the *Sun*, Brown said, "This is not an attempt to protect one's self or others, but it's a chase of an individual with a handgun," Brown said. "[Knight] understands and the State's Attorney] understands that just running with a gun does not allow police to use deadly force, so the officer knows his 'get out of jail card' has to be 'that the gun was pointed at me.'"

According to the *Sun*, Johnson had recently done time in federal prison for a weapons charge and was illegally

in possession of the firearm at the time of his death.

Baltimore-area police have a well-known history of abuse of power and outright corruption. The killing of Johnson by the county police occurred five years and a month after the 2015 murder of Freddy Gray, a 25-year-old man who died in the back of a city police van. Gray's murder caused mass protests throughout the country, as the city and state governments responded to popular protests by sending in riot police and National Guardsmen to occupy the streets. No officers were found guilty in Gray's murder.

The killing of Johnson also happened a little more than a week before the Memorial Day murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis ignited nationwide mass protests against police brutality. The state's response was one of brutal repression coupled with vague promises to reform the police nationwide.

This month Baltimore County's Democratic representatives will also implement a number of limited reforms that include requiring officers to report excessive force; building a public dashboard of police data that will display the number of complaints against officers, as well as show when force was used against civilians, along with traffic stop data broken down by race; implementing a new training curriculum; and hiring a third party organization to review police hiring practices and data related to discrimination in testing and background investigations.

As with similar actions carried out in jurisdictions throughout the United States in recent weeks, no meaningful change will come of these reforms. Reforming the police is impossible under a capitalist system that requires armed representatives to guard the enormous wealth hoarded by the ruling class and to enforce its domination over the working class. The struggle against police brutality and racism is fundamentally a struggle against the capitalist system.



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