

Alabama police officer convicted of murder in shooting of suicidal man

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Huntsville, Alabama police officer William Darby was convicted last Friday for the murder of Jeffrey Parker, 49, on April 3, 2018. Darby will face 20 years to life in prison.

Parker had called 911 to report that he was suicidal and that he was holding a gun to his head. According to a lawsuit filed by the family of Jeffrey Parker, another officer, Genisha Pegues, had arrived five minutes before Darby. She entered the room with her gun pointed down towards the floor to find Parker sitting on the couch with a gun pointed to his head. She attempted to speak with him for several minutes, prior to Darby's arrival.

Darby, who was 25 at the time and had been on the force for just 18 months, arrived and immediately began screaming at Pegues to aim her gun at Parker and ordered Parker several times to drop his weapon. After Parker failed to comply with his orders Darby fired a single fatal shot, just 11 seconds after entering the house.

The murder of Jeffrey Parker, who was clearly suffering from a mental health crisis, is one case in a far broader epidemic of police killings of people with mental health issues.

According to data on police killings compiled by the *Washington Post*, one in four people killed by the police suffered from mental health problems.

While media coverage of police centers around the racial aspects of police brutality, the stunning figures on police killings of the severely mentally ill present an even deadlier relationship, between the police and a group of people who make up less than 1 in 50 Americans. Another study by the Treatment Advocacy Center (TAC) found that people with untreated mental illness are 16 times more likely to be killed by the police than other civilians.

“By dismantling the mental illness treatment system, we have turned the mental health crisis from a medical issue into a police matter,” said John Snook, the co-author of the study by the TAC. “This is patently unfair, illogical and is proving harmful both to the individual in desperate need of care and the officer who is forced to respond.”

The dismantling of mental health services over the past decades has created an unprecedented crisis of mental health treatment in America. A study by the National Council for Mental Wellbeing found that while 56 percent of Americans seek mental health services, only 26 percent believe these services to be accessible.

And as with all major social crises, mental health is fundamentally a class issue. According to the study, more than half of people who seek mental health services are in low-income households. One in four respondents noted that they had to choose between receiving mental health treatment or meeting the daily necessities of life, and 17 percent responded that they had to choose between mental health care or physical health care due to financial constraints.

This horrendous lack of available mental health services has resulted in the police becoming the primary responders to mental health crises. The National Alliance on Mental Illness estimates that 15 percent of men and 30 percent of women in jail have a serious mental health condition, highlighting how the response of the capitalist system to mental illness is to treat those suffering from it as criminals.

For the capitalist class it is far more cost-efficient to imprison or kill the mentally ill than to make any effort to effectively treat their illness.

This is reflected in the approach of the police to handling interactions with the mentally ill, highlighted

in the murder of Jeffrey Parker. According to Peter Scharf, a criminologist at the Louisiana State University School of Public Health and Justice, police officers may receive from anywhere between four to 12 hours of training in mental health. A study by the Police Executive Research Forum revealed that officers receive an average of 58 hours of firearms training, compared to just eight hours of crisis intervention training.

The result has been more than 1,300 police killings of mentally ill people since 2015, according to the *Washington Post* database. Of these, 94 percent were men, 56 percent were white, 16 percent were black and 13 percent were Hispanic.

Many police departments have promised to expand mental health and crisis intervention training. However, it is not clear that this will result in fewer killings.

In Springfield, Oregon in 2019, 33 year old Stacy Kenny was killed by police in her own car while on the phone with 911. Kenny, who had been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, desperately pleaded with the 911 operator to explain why she was being pulled over by the police. The police proceeded to break the windows of her car, taser her twice, punch her in the face over a dozen times and attempt to pull her from the vehicle by her hair.

Kenny was eventually shot to death when she attempted to drive away with an officer inside the car. After her death an officer can be heard on the recorded 911 call saying, “We are all okay. Bad guy down.”

The officer who assaulted and shot her five times, Sgt. Richard A. Lewis, was in charge of the Crisis Intervention Team training for the Springfield police department.

Nor have local politicians and police departments given any indication that they view the police murder of the mentally ill as a significant problem.

Following the murder of Jeffrey Parker, the Huntsville City Council donated \$125,000 to Darby’s defense, and mayor Tommy Battle said in a statement that “Officer Darby followed the appropriate safety protocols in his response on the scene. He was doing what he was trained to do in the line of duty.”

Battle was not lying or attempting to make excuses. These are the tactics that the police are trained in and encouraged to deploy against the population.

Despite testimony from Genisha Pegues that she had

never felt threatened by Parker, the city and police department continue to hold the position that he was a threat to both officers’ lives and that Darby was justified in his use of force.

The police will continue to see the harassment and murder of the mentally ill as justified and they will increasingly deploy these same tactics against the working class as a whole. Even though Darby has been convicted in this case, police violence against the mentally ill will continue to be a persistent problem under the capitalist system.



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