

Former Minnesota police Officer Kim Potter found guilty in shooting death of Daunte Wright

Kevin Reed
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The jury in the trial of former police Officer Kimberly Potter returned a guilty verdict Thursday on two counts of manslaughter for the shooting death of 20-year-old Daunte Wright in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota, a suburb of Minneapolis, on April 11.

After deliberating for 27 hours since Monday, the 12-member jury—comprised of nine whites, two Asian Americans and one black member—found Potter guilty of first- and second-degree manslaughter when she fired one fatal shot from her gun at the young man during a traffic stop and attempted arrest. Potter, a white officer with 26 years in the Brooklyn Center Police Department, had claimed on the day of the shooting and throughout the trial that she mistook her service weapon for her Taser when she shot Wright.

The former police officer displayed no emotion when the verdict was read. The parents of Daunte Wright—Arbuey Wright, who is black, and Katie Bryant, who is white—were in the courtroom and let out sighs and cries, according to news reports. Bryant told reporters later in the afternoon, “The moment we heard guilty on manslaughter one emotion, every single emotion that you can imagine just running through your body. I kind of let out a yelp because it was built up in the anticipation.”

In deciding on both first- and second-degree manslaughter, the jury concluded that Potter had committed “a conscious or intentional act” in handling her gun in a manner that created a risk that she was aware of and disregarded and that she had also consciously taken a chance of causing great bodily harm.

Potter was ordered held without bail by Fourth Judicial District Judge Regina Chu after the verdict was

read at the Hennepin County Courthouse in Minneapolis, and was led out of the courtroom in handcuffs. Judge Chu, who is scheduled to sentence Potter on February 18, denied a motion by the defense to allow Potter to go home before sentencing on the grounds of her “deep roots in the community.” The judge said, “I cannot treat this case any differently than any other case.”

The maximum prison sentence for first-degree manslaughter, based on reckless use or handling of a firearm, is 15 years. Since Potter, 49, has no criminal history, legal experts say Minnesota sentencing guidelines recommend a prison term of between 6 and 8.5 years. Potter was transferred to the Minnesota Correctional Facility in Shakopee, Minnesota, according to the state Department of Corrections.

The fatal shooting of Daunte Wright and the subsequent indictment, arrest and trial of the officer who killed him are a case study in the class-based application of law enforcement and criminal justice in America that are repeated day in and day out in towns and cities across the country.

Wright was driving with his girlfriend in a vehicle that was registered in his brother’s name, and they were on their way to a car wash when they were pulled over by police on April 11. Potter was a passenger in a Brooklyn Center police cruiser, along with a trainee officer who observed Wright signaling a right turn from a left turn lane. The officers then determined that his car registration tag was expired, and he had an air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror, a violation in the state of Minnesota.

After Wright was pulled over, the officers found that he was driving without a license, did not have proof of

auto insurance and, when they ran his name through a police database, that there was an open warrant for his arrest due to failure to appear in court on a misdemeanor gun possession charge. The officers also found that there was a protective order against Wright by an unnamed woman.

The officers decided to arrest Wright, and he exited the vehicle and put his hands behind his back in order to be handcuffed. At this point, Wright started resisting the arrest, broke free from the officers and reentered the car. The training officer opened the passenger side door and attempted to prevent Wright from gaining control of the steering wheel.

By this point, Potter, who was on the driver's side, had already taken her 9mm Glock from her right-side holster while her Taser remained holstered on her left side. She said, "I'll tase you," and then yelled, "Taser!, Taser!, Taser!" and fired a single shot into Wright's chest. Police body cam footage shows Potter pulling her gun, shooting Wright and immediately saying she shot him by accident because she mistook her gun for a Taser and exclaiming, "Holy shit, I just shot him."

The car moved away from the location of the traffic stop for a short distance before it collided with another vehicle. He was shortly thereafter pronounced dead at the scene. The incident took place during the trial of Derek Chauvin, the Minneapolis police officer who was later found guilty of killing George Floyd by kneeling on his neck on May 25, 2020.

In the charged political environment nearly a year after the mass protests against police violence arising from the brutal killing of Floyd, word about the shooting of Wright spread throughout the Minneapolis area and demonstrations began immediately in the Twin Cities and spread to other parts of the US.

Police attacked protesters for three days after crowds formed outside of the Brooklyn Center police headquarters. Police in riot gear were deployed, mass arrests were carried out, and media representatives were detained in what was described by reporters as a "war zone." Meanwhile, Brooklyn Center Mayor Mike Elliott called on Democratic Minnesota Governor Tim Walz to mobilize National Guard troops that were then quickly dispatched to back up the local police.

It was under the conditions of social unrest that Potter was arrested and charged with second-degree manslaughter by the Washington County Attorney's

Office in the death of Wright. With protests continuing and demands being raised for the charges to be upgraded to murder, the office of Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison took over the prosecution of Potter on May 21. On September 2, Ellison's office added the charge of first-degree manslaughter.

Throughout the trial, which began on December 8, the defense argued that Potter had committed an "action error" when she shot Wright with gun. In the words of her lawyer, this means doing "one thing when intending to do another," or, according to an academic definition, it is "a human error under stress."

Significantly, the psychological argument against conviction of Potter was combined by her defense lawyers with claims that her use of deadly force was justified even if she did not know she had a gun in her hand. As is typical in the rare instances that police are tried for committing murder, the defense argued that Wright was responsible for his own death. These arguments, which are used to justify so many police killings every year, were rejected outright by the jury.



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