

# Waukegan, Illinois police face no charges after forcing false confession from teenage boy

George Gallanis  
17 March 2022

One month after a 15-year-old boy was wrongfully charged for a shooting and subsequently placed in jail for two days, the detectives who forced his false conviction remain at their jobs without even a slap on their wrists.

Martell Williams was sitting at his desk at Waukegan High School, in Waukegan, Illinois, a suburb north of Chicago, when he was pulled from his class and taken to the police department.

According to his lawyer, Kevin O'Connor, detectives took the teenage boy to the police station without notifying his mother and forced him through trickery and lies into falsely confessing to an armed robbery and attempted murder that occurred on February 4, when a clerk at a dollar store in Waukegan was shot in the face during a robbery. The youth would spend two nights at the Lake County Juvenile Detention Center after confessing to the crime he did not commit.

“Once I reached the office there were two officers there. As soon as I got in, they didn’t tell me nothing,” Williams told WGN-TV. “They just said, ‘you’re under arrest.’”

Williams’ attorney told WGN-TV the detectives worked fast to get a confession, pressing him as soon as he arrived at the police department. “Try to bribe him with McDonald’s saying, ‘Look. Just tell us you were there,’” his attorney said. “They don’t even tell him about a shooting. ‘Just tell us you were there, and we’ll have you home in 10 minutes.’”

The charges against Williams were later dropped after his family provided evidence he was playing in a high school basketball game the evening of the incident— at a city 20 miles away. “If his sister hadn’t found this evidence, he would have been convicted,” O’Connor told the *Washington Post*.

Waukegan interim Police Chief Keith Zupec stated

that the detectives involved in obtaining the false confession would not be subject to any kind of disciplinary actions. The City of Waukegan issued a statement that said: “The City is engaging with an independent law enforcement consulting firm to review not only how this case was handled, but all of the City’s policies regarding the investigation, arrest, interrogation, and charging of juvenile suspects.”

Additionally, Lake County State’s Attorney Eric Rinehart also issued a statement, which read: “We are continuing to investigate the case and how we can require police to eliminate tactics that lead to false confessions. We have already scheduled additional training with Waukegan and other departments to address this issue.”

This case is reminiscent of the persecution of the Central Park Five in New York City in 1989, when five African American and Hispanic teenagers aged 13 to 16 were arrested and convicted in the rape and attempted murder of a 28-year-old white female investment banker, Trisha Meili, who was jogging in Central Park. Under pressure from police and without their parents present, the teens were pressured into confessing to the crime.

A hysteria swept the headlines of tabloids for weeks in which the boys were denounced and declared guilty. Former President Donald Trump, then a New York real estate mogul, took out full-page ads in local newspapers, including the *New York Times*, which bore the demand, “BRING BACK THE DEATH PENALTY! BRING BACK OUR POLICE! I want to hate these muggers and murderers. They should be forced to suffer and, when they kill, they should be executed for their crimes. ... CIVIL LIBERTIES END WHEN AN ATTACK ON OUR SAFETY BEGINS!”

The victim, suffering from memory loss due to the

attack, was unable to identify her attackers. The innocent teenagers spent between 6 and 13 years in prison before a serial rapist confessed to the crime.

According to the National Registry of Exonerations, false confessions are rampant in the American criminal justice system. More than one-quarter of people in the registry who were accused of murder gave false confessions, while 81 percent of people with mental illness or intellectual disabilities accused of homicide gave a false confession.

That the Waukegan Police Department has not raised a single finger to discipline the detectives who nearly destroyed Williams' life is characteristic of police departments across the United States. While police kill approximately 1,000 people on average every year and maim countless others, they almost never face punishment for their actions and are sent back onto the streets to terrorize the working class.



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