Columbus, Ohio police officer cleared of wrongdoing after killing 16-year-old Ma'Khia Bryant

Anthony Wallace
20 March 2022

A Franklin County, Ohio grand jury has decided not to indict Columbus police officer Nicholas Reardon for shooting and killing 16-year-old Ma'Khia Bryant during a fight outside her foster home on April 20 of last year. The jury ruled a "no bill," indicating that it had decided the deadly shooting was justifiable, and that no crime had been committed.

Witnesses at the scene, including Bryant's 15-year-old sister, say that Bryant acted in self-defense, and that the other party first produced a knife, provoking Bryant to grab a steak knife from the kitchen. The likelihood of this account is corroborated by the fact that it was Bryant's sister who called 911 to request help.

Though this information could have greatly impacted how the situation was handled, Officer Reardon shot first and asked questions later, just as his training dictates. Bryant was shot four times within one minute of Reardon's arrival at the scene.

According to the recommendation of the Bureau of Criminal Investigation, under the purview of Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost, Officer Reardon was ruled to have probable cause in using lethal force. What constitutes probable cause, however, is far from clear.

District attorneys often turn to grand juries when police are accused of a crime, instead of directly charging them, as is done with most people. A grand jury inquest is kept secret and it is not clear what evidence prosecutors presented to the jury or what charges they asked the grand jury to return, if any.

A press release from special prosecutors assigned to the case, H. Tim Merkle and Gary Shroyer, highlights just how nebulous the legal understanding of "probable cause" can be. "Under Ohio law, the use of deadly force by a police officer is justified when there exists an immediate or imminent threat of death or serious bodily injury to the officer or another," Merkle and Shroyer wrote.

Based on this vague and self-serving explanation given by those who would be prosecuting Reardon, deadly force is *always* a legally viable option whenever an officer shows up. The officer's arrival, in and of itself, greatly increases the chance of "bodily injury to the officer," and definitely, given the police track record—killing approximately 1,000 people every year—increases the chance of harm, often lethal harm, to "another."

Reardon "acted appropriately," according to Jeff Simpson, president of the Fraternal Order of Police Capital City Lodge No. 9. "It's unfortunate when anyone loses their life," Simpson said, "but the officer saved lives that day and did what he was trained to do."

Whereas "unfortunate" is an incredible understatement, the final part of Simpson's claim does, inadvertently, ring true: Reardon, without question, did precisely "what he was trained to do."

With other, non-lethal methods at his disposal, such as a taser, Reardon, a veteran of the US military, can, via body-cam footage, clearly be heard yelling, "What's going on," and "Hey," multiple times before fatally firing his weapon four times in one second.

Despite the great claims police chiefs and local politicians make about how much extra professional training in non-lethal tactics and conflict mediation their officers receive, lethal force is seemingly used indiscriminately and the killings continue unabated.

With the entire legal justice system stacked in favor of police, and with virtually no chance of facing indictment, let alone conviction and imprisonment, an

© World Socialist Web Site

increasingly militarized police force is given the unspoken green light to kill with impunity.

Since 2005, 155 police officers in the United States have been convicted of manslaughter or murder. A slight uptick in recent years has seen more officers convicted than ever before: seven in 2017, 10 in 2018, 12 in 2019, 16 in 2020, and a record 21 in 2021. This slight increase, however, must be put in its proper context; since 2017, a staggering 5,593 people have been killed by on-duty police officers.

Bryant is also the victim of poverty. She and her sister had been put into the foster care system after their grandmother, who was raising them, was evicted by her landlord and became homeless. The children had been moved to four different homes.

The altercation that led to Bryant's death began when a 22-year-old woman, Tionna Bonner, and a former resident at the foster home, showed up and began berating the children for not keeping the house clean enough.

As the arguing escalated and another former resident arrived, also yelling at the children, Ja'Niah, Ma'Khia's 15-year-old sister, called her grandmother, Jeanene Hammonds, who came over and told her grandchildren to gather their things and come with her.

Witnesses say that Bonner got a knife from her car, which prompted Ma'Khia to get a steak knife from the kitchen and for Ja'Niah to call the police. According to Bonner, she put her knife back in the car before the police pulled up.

The police and the legal justice system are a tool for suppressing the working class, which is why victims of police violence and those receiving lengthy prison sentences are nearly always working class. And after a police shooting, these "special bodies of armed men," in essence, investigate themselves, leaving little doubt about the outcome.

Such being the case, the invitation to the Justice Department by Democratic Columbus Mayor Andrew Ginther to investigate the Columbus Police Department for "deficiencies and racial disparities" is nothing but a pantomime of transparency. Aside from this hollow gesture, in the wake of Bryant's death, Ginther had little to offer but platitudes, including the obligatory offer of prayers to the family and an urge that citizens be patient with each other.

In Columbus, Ohio, despite such a patient and prayerful mayor, the terror of police violence is particularly acute.

According to a joint study by Ohio Alliance for Innovation in Population Health and Ohio University, Columbus, the nation's 14th largest city, and Franklin County as a whole, the nation's 18th most populous county, rank disproportionately high nationwide in police killings. Recent high-profile police shooting deaths include 27-year-old Miles Jackson in 2001 and 47-year-old Andre Hill in 2020.

Likewise, some of the harshest police clashes with protesters in the wake of the George Floyd murder happened in Columbus, where Governor Mike DeWine imposed a mandatory curfew and deployed the Ohio National Guard.

During the protests, among those who erroneously thought they were exempt from police brutality were US Representative Joyce Beatty, Columbus City Council President Shannon Hardin and Franklin County Commissioner Kevin Boyce. All three were pepper-sprayed by police.

Also in the police crosshairs were members of the press, including reporters for the Ohio State University's newspaper, *The Lantern*, whose credentials were shown to police but ignored.

Ma'Khia Bryant's death is an indictment of the entire system of capitalist law enforcement.

No police department, including the Columbus Police Department, can be reformed. Along with the military, police forces worldwide operate as an apparatus designed to enforce the interests of the ruling capitalist elite.

The only social force capable of breaking the shackles of capitalism is the international working class armed with a revolutionary socialist program.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site