Washington, D.C. police officers found guilty in 2020 traffic death of Karon Hylton-Brown

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On December 21, two officers from the Washington D.C. Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) were found guilty in the traffic death of 20-year old Karon Hylton-Brown in 2020.

Officers Terence Sutton and Andrew Zabavsky were convicted of conspiracy and obstruction of justice for trying to cover up the circumstances of Hylton-Brown's death. Sutton was also charged and found guilty of second-degree murder, a first for an MPD police officer.

On October 23, 2020, Sutton was with three other officers wearing plainclothes in an unmarked car. Sutton claimed he tried to stop Hylton-Brown because the latter was driving a moped without a helmet. What followed was a chase that lasted a few minutes until Zabavsky tried to cut Hylton-Brown off and as a result, the latter collided with a car and flew up in the air, which resulted in a brain injury and his later death.

At first, the officers claimed that they tried to stop Hylton-Brown because he wasn't wearing a helmet. However, Washington, D.C. police guidelines forbid officers to give chase to motorists for traffic infractions. In court, lawyers for Sutton and Zabavsky sought to overcome this fact by asserting that they suspected Hylton-Brown was armed.

In addition, government prosecutors also established that the two officers conspired to misrepresent the circumstances surrounding Hylton-Brown's fatal accident. According to the *Washington Post*, Sutton and Zabavsky "turned off their body cameras and conferred with each other" at the scene of the crash, gave oncoming traffic "clearance to leave" and "did not immediately notify the department's major crash unit, as was required, nor did they interview any witnesses to the collision or secure the crash site for evidence collection."

At their 4th District Station that night, "the officers misled their shift commander by describing the crash as relatively insignificant, downplaying Hylton-Brown's injuries and omitting any mention of a chase." The *Post* concludes by noting "the officers' goal was to forestall an in-depth investigation of the incident, but the plan failed when Hylton-Brown's injuries proved to be fatal.

As a result, both Sutton and Zabavsky were found guilty in the death of Hylton-Brown. Karen Hylton-Brown—Karon's mother—became visibly emotional at the sentencing, "jumping up and down in her seat and snapping her fingers as the verdict was read," reads a report from NBC Washington. She was later removed from the courtroom by deputies for "screaming at the officers at the defense table."

The officers' sentencing has not been scheduled. Sutton faces a maximum of 40 years for second degree murder, 20 years for obstructing justice, and 5 years for conspiracy charge. Zabavsky is facing 25 years for the obstruction and conspiracy charge.

This is the first time that an MPD officer has ever been charged and convicted for a murder. Last October, an article from the *Post* reported that 37 officers between 2015-2021 were reinstated after being fired for misconduct or had complaints against them. Thirty-six of these officers received a total of $14.3 million in back pay. It is "relatively common in D.C. for a police officer to resume working on the force despite previous criminal or civil charges," said the report, which is based on internal documents from city auditors. According to the Mapping Police Violence database, police killed 1,181 people in the US last year.

Hylton-Brown's death occurred against the backdrop of the mass protests in 2020 that swept the country after the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis by police. Muriel Bowser, Washington, D.C.'s Democratic

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mayor, attempted to feign support for the protests in Washington D.C. while then-President Donald Trump deployed the National Guard to attack the protesters.

In June 2020, the mayor proclaimed the streets adjacent to the White House "Black Lives Matter Plaza," invoking the popular protest slogan. However, a lawsuit filed by protesters against government officials responsible for the Trump administration crackdown revealed that Washington D.C. police also participated alongside federal troops.

During the George Floyd protests, Muriel Bowser selected Robert Contee III as police chief. A former officer, Contee lashed out in 2021 against policies that he said, "coddle violent criminals." This was in response to a shooting that happened in a restaurant near Logan Circle and the release of some prisoners due to COVID-19. At the time of his elevation to police chief, Contee was praised within the Washington political establishment and press as "the ideal choice to lead the department during a time of great challenge and change," according to the *Post*'s editorial board.

Despite the Democratic Party's attempt to portray itself as a party of the people, it is just as committed to the interests of the ruling class as the Republican Party. At the time of Hylton-Brown's murder, Bowser proclaimed that she wanted "to acknowledge the pain that the family of Karon Hylton is experiencing right now. They are obviously heartbroken…"

Notably, Karon's mother confronted Bowser in 2021 over her months of inaction regarding the death of her son. "I'm trying my best to be a respectful citizen, but…woman to woman… your officers that protect this city chased and killed my child," said Karen Hylton-Brown in comments captured by NBC reporters.

There have been no comments from Muriel Bowser's office following the guilty verdict against Sutton and Zabavsky, keeping in step with the Democratic Party's general shift toward making overt demonstrations of support for the police and law and order.

For his part, Contee issued a statement to his officers on the ruling. "I know that this indictment today may seem like an indictment of all the members of the department or of all the members who wear the badge," he said, adding, "there are many in the community who recognize the hard work that you do, who support the work that you do."

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