

Five officers involved in death of Tyre Nichols fired, body camera footage shows “nonstop beating” of a “human piñata” say attorneys

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The family of Tyre Nichols, 29, the driver who died on January 10 after being beaten by five police officers in Memphis, Tennessee, was given access to the police body camera footage of Nichols’ assault on Monday.

According to attorneys for the family, Nichols was subjected to a “nonstop beating.” Attorney Antonio Romanucci said during a press conference that, “He was defenseless the entire time. He was a human piñata for those police officers. It was an unadulterated, unabashed, non-stop beating of this young boy for three minutes.”

Attorney Benjamin Crump added, “Yet again, we’re seeing evidence of what happens to Black and brown people from simple traffic stops. . . You should not be killed because of a simple traffic stop.”

“It is appalling. It is deplorable. It is heinous. It is violent,” Crump continued. “It is troublesome on every level.”

Rodney Wells, Nichols’ stepfather, called the video “horrific” and said that “No father, mother should have to witness what I saw today.”

Ravaughn Wells, Nichols’ mother, was reportedly unable to view the video past the first minute after hearing her son say “What did I do?” Nichols can be heard calling for his mother three times at the end of the video, according to the family’s attorneys.

Nichols was reportedly pulled over for a routine traffic stop on January 7. According to the police report, a confrontation between Nichols and the officers occurred that resulted in him fleeing on foot. The five officers, all of whom are also African American, pursued Nichols and apprehended him, after which he was sent to the hospital with severe injuries. He died in the hospital three days later.

According to Nichols’ family and their attorneys, the body camera shows that Nichols was concerned for his safety and fled the officers because he was afraid of them.

Speaking of his stepson, Rodney Wells said, “Our son ran because he was scared for his life. He did not run because he was trying to get rid of no drugs, no guns, no any of that. He ran because he was scared for his life. And when you see the video, you will see why he was scared for his life.”

The police body camera footage has not been released to the public yet but is expected to be released within the next two weeks. Police Chief Cerelyn Davis claimed that the footage was not being released so that witnesses could give reports on the incident based on their memories rather than what they could see in the video.

“Transparency remains a priority in this incident,” she said, “and a premature release could adversely impact the criminal investigation and the judicial process. We are working with the District Attorney’s Office to determine the appropriate time to release video recordings publicly.”

Shelby County District Attorney Steve Mulroy was more open about concerns that releasing the footage would fuel public outrage and protests. “I know that people are very, very concerned about this,” he said. “I think the incident has the potential to undermine confidence in the fairness of our police force and the criminal justice system.”

Such concerns over the eruption of popular opposition to police brutality by local officials give further insight into the severity of the police murder, which has been likened to the savage beating of

Rodney King in Los Angeles in 1991, which set off mass protests and riots after the officers involved were acquitted.

According to Crump, Nichols was tased, beaten, pepper sprayed and restrained just 80 yards from his family's home. A photo of Nichols taken by his family shows him in a hospital bed with severe wounds and clear signs that he was brutally beaten in the face.

All five officers involved—Justin Smith, Emmitt Martin III, Desmond Mills, Demetrius Haley and Tadarrius Bean—were fired last week after an internal investigation determined that they had violated department policies by using excessive force and failing to render aid to Nichols.

The Justice Department, FBI and Tennessee Bureau of Investigation are conducting criminal investigations into the incident to determine if the officers should be charged for the killing.

The Memphis Fire Department has also placed on leave two EMTs who had arrived at the scene to render care to Nichols while he was being transported to the hospital. J. B. Smiley, a Memphis City Councilman, approved of the decision, saying that “we have to send a very strong message that any type of misconduct will not be allowed to go on in the city administration.”

Patrice Robinson, Memphis City Councilwoman, said, “my concern is that if they were not there in a timely manner and they didn't do what they were supposed to do we want action. That's all the community is saying, let's do our jobs, let's get to work, and let's support one another.”

An internal investigation is ongoing into the two EMTs, though details of what role they may have played in Nichols' death have not been elaborated on by city officials.

The savage killing of Nichols comes amidst a string of high profile police killings across the country to start the new year. Protests have erupted in Atlanta after the police killing of 26-year old environmental activist Manuel Terán, also known as Tortugueta, on January 18. Police claim that Terán shot and wounded an officer but have failed to provide evidence to back up that claim.

On January 9, police in Guymon, Oklahoma shot and killed Chiewalthap Mariar, 26, a Sudanese refugee, while he was working on the line at a Seaboard Foods pork processing plant. The police reportedly arrived to

escort him off the premises after he was fired by management. He was told to finish his shift and was working at the time he was shot.

In Los Angeles earlier this month the Los Angeles Police Department killed three people in the space of two days. In one incident, bearing a striking similarity to Nichols' death, Keenan Anderson was choked and repeatedly tased before dying from a heart attack at a hospital. Anderson had cooperated with police after a motorcycle accident before suffering from signs of emotional and mental distress, leading to his assault by the officers on the scene.

These incidents are not the isolated acts of “bad apples,” the product of poor training or inadequate funding. Police violence is the natural product of the brutality of the capitalist system, which upholds the right of the capitalist class to exploit the working class and create vast inequality through force. After several years of a pandemic that has killed and injured millions of people and which was leveraged by the super-rich to massively increase their wealth, 2022 saw the highest number of police killings in the United States since records were begun, at 1,176 killings by police officers.



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