

Northern Virginia police officer fired after executing man suspected of stealing sunglasses

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A Fairfax County police officer in northern Virginia was fired from the force last week after video footage from a body camera showed the officer shooting Timothy Johnson, a man suspected of shoplifting a pair of sunglasses from Tysons Corner Mall.

Fairfax County Police Department officials stated on Thursday that Sergeant Wesley Shifflett was “administratively separated” from the force for disobeying use-of-force rules after he was identified as having fired the fatal bullet that killed Johnson, 37, on February 22. Officer First Class James Sadler was also identified as having fired bullets at Johnson during the altercation.

The state of Virginia is planning to make a decision on whether to charge Shifflett in the killing. Charges have yet to be filed.

Johnson was inside a Nordstrom store in the mall when a theft prevention security guard suspected him of stealing the sunglasses. The security guard called the Fairfax County Police “Tysons Urban Team,” which sent three officers. Shifflett and Sadler were in plain clothes, while the third officer, who arrived later, was uniformed.

The uniformed officer watched Johnson leave the Nordstrom store and walk into a parking garage. From there, officers pursued. Footage from the third, uniformed officer’s body camera shows the plainclothes officers chasing Johnson through the garage in the direction of Route 7 before he changed direction and ran into the woods across the street from Fashion Boulevard.

“Going into the woods, through the woods,” Shifflett can be heard saying in the video as the pursuit continued. Both Shifflett and Sadler fired at Johnson, who cannot be seen, from behind. Three gunshots can be heard, one of which hit Johnson in the torso. As the

third shot is heard, one of the officers yells, “Stop reaching! Stop reaching!”

Johnson can then be heard screaming, “I’m not reaching for nothing. I don’t have nothing.” His body can then be seen on the ground ahead of the officers, who proceeded to do CPR until paramedics arrived. The third officer’s footage was taken from behind the other two and did not capture the actions which led to the shooting.

When more responding officers arrived, Shifflett can be heard saying, “He didn’t get any rounds off. I don’t know if he’s armed. He was continually reaching in his waistband. I told him, ‘Let me see your hands. Let me see your hands.’” In the video, however, prior to shooting Johnson, Shifflett is never heard actually saying these words.

Responding to the release of the footage, Johnson’s family attorney, Carl Crews, called the shooting an “execution.” Crews said, “He could have been apprehended without a shot being fired. There were several police officers present. This could have been done.”

Caleb Kershner, Shifflett’s attorney, asserted the officers’ untrammelled right to execute Johnson. “The law on this point is clear. A police officer is authorized—and trained—to use lethal force when he reasonably believes that he is in jeopardy of serious bodily harm or death. And that is exactly what happened in this incident,” the attorney said in statements to the press.

Kershner advanced the authoritarian argument that a police officer has the right to shoot first and ask questions later: “The law does not require him to be shot at, or to see a gun, before he responds.”

Johnson’s mother, Melissa Johnson, said there was no explanation for why the police used lethal force for

an alleged misdemeanor. The Johnson family and supporters had called for the release of the video footage immediately after the shooting. Crews, the attorney, said, “If the video would have exonerated the officer we would have seen it before now. It does not. He was not vindicated at all.”

Since Johnson’s death, the police had cynically pointed to previous felonies on Johnson’s record as proof that he posed some type of threat. Back in February, Melissa Johnson rebuked the Fairfax police and investigators for “villainizing” her son and speculating about whether he had a gun when no weapon was found. She accused the police of acting as “judge, jury and executioner at the same time.”

Last Thursday, after seeing the police video footage, Johnson said of her son’s death, “The only thing that they [the police] knew was that he was accused of allegedly taking a pair of sunglasses. Officer Sadler and Shifflett did not know his name, did not know his age, did not know where he went to school, did not know the names of his children or anything about his personal or judicial history. The only thing they knew was that he was Black and a male and allegedly triggered the alarm for the store.”

While racial motives certainly appear to have played a role in this case, as well as many other police shootings, the primary factor in police brutality cases is class. In 2022, police killed 1,238 people. There were only 10 days last year that went by without the police killing someone. The breakdown of these killings, while disproportionately affecting Black people relative to their proportion of the general population, shows working class people of all races were targeted, with the largest number being white.

A study of Fairfax County’s police, conducted by the University of Texas in 2021, determined that regardless of the race of a police officer, “both White and Black populations showed an elevated use of force compared to the benchmarks” of arrest and suspect statistics in the county, according to a report in the *Washington Post*.

Home to the Central Intelligence Agency in Langley and close to the Department of Defense in Arlington, Fairfax is the fifth-wealthiest county in the US. Despite the county having one of the lowest rates of violent crime in the country, the FCPD is the largest police department in the state of Virginia, with over 1,500

sworn officers.



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