

Police officer escapes indictment for shooting unarmed man in Colorado

By Nick Barrickman
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The latest exoneration for the police shooting of unarmed civilians came on Wednesday when Aurora, Colorado, police officer Paul Jerothe escaped charges for the March 6 killing of 37-year-old Naeschylus Vinzant. The killing led to protests against police brutality throughout the Denver area.

Vinzant was shot and killed on March 6 while fleeing from Aurora Police Department SWAT team members, after he allegedly had a physical confrontation with his wife and kidnapped their 2-month-old infant several days earlier. Vinzant, who was on parole at the time, reportedly ran from police when confronted.

The grand jury report states that after taking several steps, Vinzant, who was black, “began to twist his body back around ... to face Officer Jerothe who had taken a position in the street near the rear of his vehicle.”

Vinzant then “lowered his body into what appeared to be an athletic posture or fighting stance [while moving] his right arm as if trying to take it [a gun] out of his pocket while holding something.” Jerothe then opened fire with an M-4 rifle, killing Vinzant instantly. The 37-year-old was later found to have been unarmed.

Other SWAT team members testified on behalf of Jerothe, stating that it had appeared as though Vinzant had been drawing a pistol. Jerothe also claimed that he believed Vinzant was prepared to die in a shoot-out with police rather than return to prison. The report states that “Officer Jerothe believed that Mr. Vinzant was going to shoot. Officer Jerothe testified he thought he was going to be killed.”

The announcement of the exoneration of another police officer comes two days after an Ohio grand jury decided not to issue an indictment of Cleveland police officers Timothy Loehmann and Frank Garmback for the 2014 shooting death of 12-year-old Tamir Rice.

The 12-year-old had been playing with a toy gun in a park when the officers arrived and immediately opened fire on the boy.

The decision not to indict Rice’s killers came after a pseudo-legal process, in which Cuyahoga County Prosecutor Timothy McGinty allowed Loehmann and Garmback to make unsworn testimony to the grand jury, presenting the officers’ take of the events without rebuttal or cross examination. Additionally, McGinty hired “experts” to conduct investigations that produced results favoring the police, which were released before the grand jury’s decision in order to prepare public opinion for the eventual exoneration.

Likewise, a trial against a Baltimore police officer charged in the death of Freddie Gray resulted in a hung jury two weeks ago, after prosecutors failed to convince the court that the officer, William G. Porter, had purposefully allowed Gray to become severely injured in a “rough ride” in the back of a police vehicle.

None of this is exceptional in the slightest. According to a count kept at killedbypolice.net, 1,194 Americans have been killed by police this year. Only 18 of these have even resulted in an indictment, according to a Tuesday article published by the *New York Times*.

The article, “More Police Officers Facing Charges, but Few See Jail,” presents this as a notable increase over previous years. In the prior decade, the yearly average was only five indictments per year for police killings. In the state of Florida, no officer has been indicted in over 20 years. Almost none of these indictments result in convictions, the article admits.

The *Times* report, by Shaila Dewan and Timothy Williams, attempts to lay the staggering number of police killings at the feet of “poor training.” They write

that “barring a new Supreme Court ruling on police use of force ... better policies, training, accountability and supervision” must be adopted.

The article quotes criminal justice professor Philip M. Stinson of Bowling Green State University to stress the point. “These are important policy discussions that need to be addressed,” he says. “We have a problem with police subculture. We have a problem with poor training, lack of training.”

The article is the *Times*’ attempt to cover for the double standard so clearly posed by the repeated exonerations of killer cops—what it calls “the gap between an unnecessary police shooting and a criminal one.” In plain English, police are able to kill at will, with almost no chance of any kind of punishment. Workers—white, black, and immigrant—are regularly locked away for minor offenses.

The authors insist that, despite a lack of legal consequences, “seismic changes” have affected policing in the US. “In a way, we’re doing bottom-up reform instead of top-down reform,” the article quotes Eugene O’Donnell of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York as saying. “We’re finding egregious endings and working from there instead of proactively saying the police system is part of the criminal justice system and consequently is broken.”

The professor adds, “The political sector hopes that the conversation will end there, at the bottom or close to the bottom.”

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