

Pennsylvania police shoot dead 12-year-old girl during home eviction

By Tom Eley
1 February 2016

On Monday morning a Pennsylvania state constable shot dead a 12-year-old girl while enforcing an eviction order on her family in rural Duncannon, near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Constable Clarke Steele fired on the girl's father, Donald Bartho Meyer Jr., 57, who police claim had aimed a rifle at Steele. The bullet passed through the man's upper arm, shattering his bone, before striking the girl, Ciara Meyer, who was standing behind her father in the doorway. She was pronounced dead at the scene.

Donald Meyer was flown to Hershey Medical Center for his wound and is being held on charges of "making terroristic threats," as well as aggravated assault, simple assault and reckless endangerment. Constable Clarke Steel, who was joined at the eviction by employees of the rental firm, has not been charged, and authorities have made no apology for the girl's death.

"Unfortunately, the constable was put into a situation where he had to defend himself," said State Police Trooper Robert T. Hicks. "Unfortunately, that little girl just happened to be behind her father at the time."

A web site set up in Ciara Meyer's memory describes her as having been "a loving vibrant 12-year-old." She attended public school in the Susquenita School District. The school's superintendent said that counselors would be available to help children and staff deal with the loss.

"Very kind, sweet kid," a neighbor told ABC 27 News. "Here's a little girl that doesn't even have a chance to grow up and live her life, and all because of this senseless act. It's horrible, absolutely heartbreaking."

According to court documents, Meyer owed \$1,780.85 to his landlord, Pfautz Rental, on monthly \$660 rent. The family was first delivered a court

complaint on December 3. The court issued an order for possession on December 28, three days after Christmas, and this was served to Meyer at his home on December 30, two days before New Year's Day.

Constable Steele arrived on Monday morning with the intention of physically removing Meyer and his daughter, who was home sick from school on Monday. He had been sent "numerous times" to warn Meyer, Hicks said.

In his last visit, Steel had given the family a 10 a.m., January 11, move-out deadline. Steele's "lawful job, because he had a valid court order, was to remove them from the property if they had not already moved," Hicks added.

According to the police version of events, Constable Steele approached the house in the morning. Donald Meyer closed the door on him and refused to talk. Steele however remained at the door of the house until Meyer returned and "engaged Constable Steele in a brief exchange of words." Police claim that Meyer then "leveled a loaded .223 caliber rifle, which had been slung and concealed along his body, directly at Constable Steele with a point of aim at his chest." At this moment Steele fired at Meyer, police say, grazing his arm but striking directly the small child that stood behind him.

Police have not yet claimed that Meyer fired on Constable Steele. A search warrant issued after the Ciara's killing found Donald Meyer's gun with a loaded chamber and a magazine clip holding 30 rounds.

Constables are a low-level police force in Pennsylvania, technically under the governor. They receive no salary, but earn money by serving papers and other functions for district courts. Constables are required to take only 80 hours of police training and supply their own equipment, including guns.

The tragedy in rural Pennsylvania combined at least two features of the American social crisis: police killings and home evictions.

Ciara is the 21st person and the first child to be killed by police in the US in the new year, according to a count kept by the *Guardian*. Twelve hundred Americans were killed by cops in 2014. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, some 406,000 people in the United States were killed by firearms between 2001 to 2013. Nearly 40 percent of these were homicides.

Evictions of poor and working class families are commonplace in “one of the worst affordable housing crises in generations,” according to Harvard University sociologist Matthew Desmond. In 2013, nearly 60 percent of all renter households spent more than 30 percent of their income on rent alone, and 30 percent of renters spent more than half of their income on rent. One in eight low-income families who rent could not afford to pay their landlords, and a similar number faced the possibility of eviction.

More recent data by real estate information firm Zillow found that the average renter now pays 30 percent or more of their income on rent—the threshold at which housing is considered unaffordable. While real wages continue to stagnate, rents rose by approximately 7 percent in 2014.

Courts dealing with eviction orders have actually shown *less* mercy to families with children, such as the Meyers.

“Children do not shield families from eviction, but rather they often expose them to it,” Desmond wrote for the November 2015 issue of the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin. “If a tenant in eviction court lives with children, her or his odds of receiving an eviction judgment almost triple, even after taking into account how much is owed to the landlord, household income, and several other key factors.”

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>