

Four Detroit area police officers await trial for murder, use of excessive force

By Tyler Van Dyke
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Four police officers are currently awaiting trial in Wayne County, encompassing greater Detroit, for excessive use of force including murder. The multiple indictments, highly unusual, come after a year that saw public outrage over a series of incidents of police violence directed against unarmed and unresisting citizens.

The incidents occurred in a sharply polarized city, seething with social tension, in the wake of mass water shutoffs and social cuts following the 2014 Detroit bankruptcy. A so-called revitalization plan for the city has benefited wealthier areas in a narrow band around downtown while largely bypassing poorer neighborhoods.

Michigan State Trooper Mark Bessner waived a preliminary hearing and will face trial for the murder of Detroit teenager Damon Grimes, who died August 26, 2017 in a police killing that sparked boisterous protests. The officer was indicted in December 2017 for firing his taser from the passenger seat of his moving police car, hitting Grimes as he rode on an ATV and causing him to crash into a parked pickup truck. Grimes soon after died of his injuries. Grimes was just 15 years old.

His family has filed a \$50 million lawsuit against the Michigan State Police.

In announcing the indictment Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy said at a news conference, “Trooper Bessner unnecessarily deployed his Taser at Mr. Grimes without legal justification or excuse as Mr. Grimes was traveling at least 35 to 40 miles per hour.”

Bessner is facing one count of second-degree murder and two counts of involuntary manslaughter—one being that death occurred when its intent was injury, the second gross negligence. The maximum penalty for second-degree murder is life in prison. Bessner is currently free on a bail of \$1 million.

Ethan Burger, the officer driving the vehicle Bessner fired the taser from and the responding officer, Jacob Listz, have not been charged.

Three other Detroit police officers are also facing charges of excessive force and police misconduct.

Officer Edward Hicks is charged with the beating of Deonta Stewart, 28. Hicks yelled at Stewart to stop running through a Detroit neighborhood. When Stewart complied and laid on the ground, Hicks began beating him, causing serious injuries to his eyes and face. It is also alleged that Hicks tried to coerce Stewart to lie about how he had received his injuries.

Hicks faces one count of assault with intent to do bodily harm less than murder, a second of aggravated assault, a third of obstruction of justice and a fourth of misconduct in office.

Officer Richard Billingslea is charged with the assault of Michael Jackson, a Detroit City bus driver, and D'Marco Craft who were at a gas station buying cigarettes. Billingslea, who according to police reports has a history of harassing Jackson, followed Jackson out of a gas station after Jackson gave him the middle finger. Billingslea then assaulted Jackson, who swung back and was then pepper sprayed and further assaulted by Billingslea. The incident was recorded on Craft's cell phone, which was thrown away by Billingslea and later recovered by a responding officer. Billingslea is alleged to have turned off his body camera at some time during the incident.

The officer is charged with one count of assault with intent to do great bodily harm, one count of aggravated assault, one count of obstruction of justice and a misdemeanor charge on his assault on Craft.

In the last case, Officer Lonnie Wade is being charged with the assault of David Bivins, age 23. Bystanders saw Wade, a Detroit police officer

moonlighting as a security officer at a Meijer grocery store, harassing Bivins as he left with his purchases.

Wade accused Bivins of shoplifting. When Bivins produced a receipt as proof, the officer argued with the victim and assaulted him, knocking him to the ground and smashing him in the head and teeth with his baton.

The investigation shows that although Bivins verbally resisted the assault, he never fought back or resisted arrest.

Wade is being charged with one count of assault with intent to do bodily harm, one count of felonious assault (also known as assault with a deadly weapon) and two counts of misconduct in office.

In another case prosecutors declined to bring charges in the shooting of 19-year-old Raynard Burton by an unidentified Detroit Police Officer in February of last year. Burton was shot after a brief car and foot chase. Police claimed Burton had lunged in the direction of an officer and there was a struggle over the gun just prior to the shooting. No gun was recovered at the scene.

There are no publicly available records of police related beatings or shootings in Detroit, though many departments around the US have made limited records available online.

A request last year from *Vice* magazine for statistics on police involved shootings in Detroit was stonewalled by local authorities, who claimed it would take 3,120 business days and cost at least \$77,532 to retrieve the requested records.

There is a long history of misconduct by the Detroit police. In 2016 the Detroit Police Department ended a 13-year period of federal oversight for unconstitutional conduct, including excessive use of force and illegal detentions.

Meanwhile, the wave of police violence continues unabated in 2018. According to the website killedbypolice.net, already there are 200 people dead at the hands of police in the United States so far in 2018.

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