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History of Police Misconduct in Champaign County

Posted Mon, 2010-07-05 11:19 by hollinsa

Since the inception of our group in 2004, Champaign-Urbana Citizens for Peace and Justice has been tracking the misconduct of local police and calling for accountability. Poor people and people of color are too often targeted by police, subject to over-charging, and receive stiffer sentences in the courts. In contrast, when police commit crimes, they are invariably given plea bargains with no jail time—if they are charged at all. Below are some examples of the some cases we have compiled.

In 1970, Edgar Houltz, a 23-year-old African American man was shot in head by Champaign police. In the early 1970s, there were two African American men killed by Champaign police. After he had left Follett's Book Store where he worked, Houltz was followed by Champaign police, led into a chase, and crashed his car. During a foot chase, Champaign police officer Fred Eastman pulled out his gun and fired, fatally shooting Houltz in the back of the head. When Eastman was tried for murder, his defense was that had slipped while firing a warning shot and accidentally killed Houltz. Despite claims by African American witnesses that Eastman had taken careful aim at his victim, an all-white jury found him innocent. Houltz' wife accepted an out-of-court settlement of \$55,000.

(For more see the Feb. 2008 issue of the Public i [here](#))

In 1971, the killing of James Williams, a black 17-year-old, was covered up by Champaign police. Williams was fatally shot during a gun battle between local law enforcement and African American youth in Champaign's North End. Initial investigations performed by the Champaign Police Department concluded that Williams had been shot accidentally by gang members and that local law enforcement play no role in his death. However, more than three years later a Champaign County grand jury was forced to reopen the case after contrary information leaked from the police department indicating that officer Michael Parker had admitted to the shooting in the immediate aftermath. During the course of the investigation it became apparent that Williams' death had been the subject of a police cover-up and that the responsibility could be traced to the highest echelons of the Champaign Police Department.

In December 1998, the Champaign Police SWAT team brutalized a black 81-year-old grandmother. Renee Holt said she was grabbed by the throat and pushed to the floor while the police searched for her nephew who, it turned out, was not in the apartment. (See News-Gazette, Dec. 11, 1998)

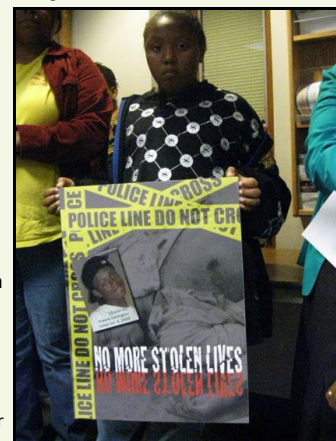
In 2000, Gregory Brown died in the custody of Champaign police. Brown, a developmentally disabled man, was beaten in an alleyway late at night by over a dozen Champaign police officers. Witnesses heard Brown crying out for help and telling police he could not breathe. He died of a heart attack. The Brown family received a \$185,000 settlement from the incident. Officer Daniel Norbits, who in 2009 shot and killed Kiwane Carrington, was one of the officers involved.

In 2004, black activists Patrick Thompson and Martel Miller were charged with felony eavesdropping by the Champaign Police Department for videotaping local police. The Citizens Watch video contrasted the heavy policing of the African American community, with the hands-off attitude of police toward students on campus. Both Police Chief R.T. Finney and City Manager Steve Carter denied involvement in the plot to charge the two activists, but an affidavit from Assistant State's Attorney Elizabeth Dobson implicated Champaign police. The City of Champaign agreed to a civil settlement with the two activists. ([See article in the Public i](#))

In 2004, there were three suicides within six months in the county jail. With 8-9 jail suicides occurring throughout the state, this meant that approximately 30% of them were in Champaign County. As a result of community outrage, the County Board renegotiated a contract with the phone provider that was providing \$14,000/month kickback to the county, but the deaths in the jail have not stopped. In 2006, Quentin Larry died of a drug overdose. In 2007, Janet Hahn died of diabetes after being denied medication. In 2009, Todd Kelly committed suicide despite being put on suicide watch.

In 2005, Urbana officer Kurt Hjort was accused of rape by a 25-year-old woman while he was on duty. Wearing his uniform and driving his squad car, Hjort followed the woman home, entered her home, and allegedly raped her. A rape kit performed shortly after tested positive for Hjort's semen. Hjort said the act was consensual. Special Prosecutor James Dedman was assigned to review the case and, despite a recommendation from the Illinois State Police to prosecute, he decided not to press criminal charges. The City of Urbana settled a civil suit filed by the woman for at least \$100,000. Hjort was forced to resign after the incident.

In December 2005, Sgt. William Alan Myers, a Sheriff's Deputy, was fired for torturing an inmate in the Champaign County jail. After guards put a mentally ill inmate in a restraint chair with a "spit hood" over his head, Sgt. Myers used a Taser on him repeatedly. Myers then falsified a police report about the incident and tried to get a fellow guard, Jeremy Heath, to do the same. Guards turned him in and the Illinois State Police came in to do an investigation in which they found Myers had tortured three other inmates. In November 2004, Michael Rich was beaten and tased by Sgt. Myers, who then falsified a police report about what happened, as did Deputy Heath, who later



turned Myers in. Yet State's Attorney Julia Rietz only charged Myers for the initial incident and according to Rich only contacted him after the statute of limitations had run out in his case. Myers was initially offered a plea bargain for a misdemeanor, but after community pressure the deal was dropped. He eventually agreed to a felony which means he will never be allowed to work as a police officer again. He was sentenced to two years of probation and 100 hours of community service.

([Read Michael Rich's letter to Sheriff Dan Walsh](#))

Also in December 2005, Sheriff's Deputy Ryan Garrett was fired for threatening his estranged wife and her boyfriend. Among the four felonies, it was alleged that Garrett had approached his wife's boyfriend and warned him, "I'm a cop, watch your back." Garrett was caught when he had a Champaign police officer stop his wife for drunk driving. After admitting he used a police database to look up the background of his wife's boyfriend, Garrett still remained defiant. The charges were dropped to a single misdemeanor and Garrett was sentenced to a \$500 fine, 100 hours of community service, and a 24 month conditional discharge. His wife, who described several incidents of abuse, said afterwards, "I never reported any of this because he was a deputy for Champaign Co. and he told me numerous times it wouldn't do me any good. And from my recent experiences with the police involving him it hasn't."

([See the article in the Public i](#))

In 2006, Champaign Police called out its SWAT team to deal with a suicidal black man in Garden Hills. Carl "Dennis" Stewart was the head janitor at Booker T. Washington Elementary School. He was going through marital problems, had separated with his wife, and was suicidal. Police received a call that he was in his car with a gun. Calling out its Armored Personnel Carrier, Champaign police chased him through Garden Hills, a neighborhood with a large population of African Americans. After police cornered him with the SWAT truck, Stewart took his own life. Police Chief R.T. Finney said his officers had shown "a considerable amount of restraint."

([See the article in the Public i](#))

In March 2007, Champaign police sent 17-year-old black youth Brian Chesley to the hospital. Chesley had been playing basketball at the Douglass Center gymnasium which was open until 11 p.m. At approximately 8:30, he was walking an 8 year old home through Douglass Park, but according to Champaign police the park had closed at sundown. When Chesley took the case to court, Champaign police admitted on the stand that they had been instructed to stop individuals in the North End, check them for warrants, and enter them into a police database. Champaign police officer Andre Davis said he stopped Chesley because, "I wanted to know why he was in the park." When Chesley refused to stop and kept walking, he was grabbed by backup police who slammed him face down on the pavement and pepper sprayed him, so that afterwards he had to be sent to the hospital. After a judge disallowed several arguments by the defense, an all-white jury found Chesley guilty of resisting and obstructing a peace officer.

([See the article in the Public i](#))

In 2007, Champaign police fired into the home of Ms. Mildred Davis, a 62-year-old grandmother, while she and her two-year-old great-grandson were in the line of fire. Police had chased a fleeing suspect into Ms. Davis' home, located in Garden Hills. Despite being told that she and her children were inside, police fired some 30 bullets into the house. Fortunately nobody was physically injured, although Ms. Davis and the children were mentally scarred.

([See the story and interview with Ms. Davis](#))

In June 2007, Champaign police engaged in a shoot-out with Donnell Clemons in Westside Park. The man, who was known to be mentally ill and living in his car by the park, was nearly killed. Three Champaign police were shot: two of them by Clemons, one of them by friendly fire. At a press conference following the shooting, Chief Finney removed an indymedia journalist, and after being threatened with a lawsuit, admitted he was wrong. Clemons was later found not guilty by reason of insanity and is currently in the custody of the Department of Human Services.

([See the article in the Public i](#))

In January 2008, 16-year veteran of the University of Illinois Police Department, Curtis Bolding, was charged with a felony for domestic battery. According to Bolding's wife, when she came home from work he was drunk and they got into an argument. He was so drunk that he tripped and knocked out his two front teeth. Growing more angry, he grabbed her by her collar and told that he could easily kill her and her family and get rid of their bodies. When she threatened to call the police, "he used his control tactics stuff," bending her wrist back. She said he pinned her down on the floor, pushing down on her chest so that she could not breathe. When he finally got off of her, she got away and called the police. When police arrived and got the story, Bolding was charged with a felony, losing his FOID card and being placed on administrative leave. After hiring Champaign attorney and city council member Tom Bruno, the State's Attorney's office dropped the charge to a misdemeanor. Bolding resigned from the force and was given a 12-month conditional discharge, but is still eligible for getting a job on another police force.



In December 2008, Champaign police detective Lisa Staples was found driving drunk in an unmarked squad car, going to wrong way on I-72 at 2:30 a.m. She refused a sobriety test and breathalyzer and was placed under arrest. A special prosecutor was appointed and just 18 days after the incident, a judge allowed for a plea bargain of 18 months court supervision which, if successfully completed, the conviction would be wiped from her record. Under enormous public outrage, Staples resigned from the police department.

In April 2009, Toto Kaiyewu, a black medical student from southern Illinois, was killed by police after being racially profiled. In the former sundown town of Villa Grove, police officer Adam Deckard noticed the Texas plates on Kaiyewu's car and thought it looked suspicious. "Not to be prejudiced or anything," he said later, "but we get a lot of Mexicans in our town." Deckard started following him.

When Kaiyewu noticed this, he stopped his car and got out. Deckard got out of his squad car and when he got closer to Kaiyewu, said he could see "evil" in his eyes. Kaiyewu got back into his car, drove off, and a chase ensued. When police stopped Kaiyewu on I-74, he got out holding a machete. After refusing to drop the weapon, police gunned him down. Kaiyewu was later found to have a history of mental illness.

([See the article in the Public i](#))

In April 2009, Kiwane Carrington, an unarmed 15-year-old black youth was killed by Champaign police. After a non-emergency call was placed about two youth trying to get into a house at 906 W. Vine St., Chief Finney and Officer Daniel Norbits arrived to find two 15 year olds behind the house. As it turned out, Kiwane stayed at the house frequently and was trying to find shelter during a rainstorm. Both police had their guns drawn and ordered the youth down on the muddy ground. According to police, the youth did not comply. When Norbits tried to push Kiwane to the ground, his gun went off killing Kiwane. Interviewed four days later, Norbits says he had a "really vague

recollection" of what happened. After State's Attorney Julia Rietz interviewed the state police investigation, she ruled the shooting an accident. Hundreds of local youth appeared at a vigil shortly afterwards and again at the funeral. A civil suit is currently pending. Read CUCPJ's complete report on the Kiwane Carrington case [here](#).
(See the article in the Public i)

The first courtwatching report from the Champaign County league and the law school indicated that African-Americans made up only 6 percent of the jury pools while composing 11 percent of the county population.

PUTTING OFFICERS IN THE SCHOOLS

In 2005, Finney insists School Resource Officers (SROs) be placed in both Champaign high schools. Records show Champaign Police are generating more criminal cases against juveniles and 80% of the SRO's contacts are with African American students.

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