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WHITE ON BLACK

Should Black citizens fear White cops?



For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Jackson, Mississippi's capital city, is mostly Black. Ditto its cops. So if citizens are better off dealing with cops of their own race, a frail, elderly Black resident should have survived a minor encounter with three Black cops. But as we reported in "[Black on Black](#)" Mr. George Robinson didn't.

This time we'll explore the citizen/cop combination that's provoked protests across the U.S. For examples we'll offer two: the August 23rd wounding of Mr. Jacob Blake, a Black resident of Kenosha, Wisconsin, by a White police officer, and the killing of Mr. Dijon Kizzee, a Black resident of a Los Angeles suburb, shot dead by White Sheriff's deputies on August 31st.

Here's an extract from a [tweet](#) posted by Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers on August 23rd, about three hours after a White Kenosha cop shot and crippled Mr. Jacob Blake:

Tonight, Jacob Blake was shot in the back multiple times, in broad daylight, in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Kathy and I join his family, friends, and neighbors in hoping earnestly that he will not succumb to his injuries....While we do not have all of the details yet, what we know for certain is that he is not the first Black man or person to have been shot or injured or mercilessly killed at the hands of individuals in law enforcement in our state or our country.

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However compelled Governor Evers may have felt to denounce the police, his swift opinionating virtually guaranteed that something important would be left out. And it was. When their handiwork went tragically astray, three White cops were trying to arrest the 29-year old Black man on [a recently-issued warrant](#) for felony sexual assault. A Black woman who was apparently Mr. Blake's former domestic partner accused him of [breaking into her home](#) while she slept, sexually assaulting her, then leaving with her car and a credit card.



Mr. Blake remained free. On August 23rd the victim called police [to complain that he was back](#). According to the Wisconsin Department of Justice, which is investigating the use of force, "Police Department officers were dispatched to a residence in the 2800 block of 40th Street after a female caller reported that her boyfriend was present and was not supposed to be on the premises." [An account posted by the police union](#) adds that

Mr. Blake "was attempting to steal the caller's keys/vehicle." Here's our best assessment of what then took place:

- Officers arrived. [Radio messages](#) indicate that they knew of the warrant. Three officers tried to intercept Mr. Blake as he walked to his car. [According to the police union](#) Mr. Blake supposedly "forcefully fought with the officers, including putting one of the officers in a headlock."
- Mr. Blake apparently freed himself and kept walking. [Two officers fired their Tasers](#) but without apparent effect. A bystander who didn't see what, if anything, Mr. Blake carried said that [officers commanded Mr. Blake](#) to "drop the knife!"
- Two bystander videos depict the last part of the encounter. (Click [here](#) and [here](#).) Pistols drawn, officers followed Mr. Blake around his vehicle to the driver's side. As he approaches the door an officer grabbed him by the shirt (see above image) and when the still-noncompliant man stepped in the cop fired seven times into his back. Police claim they recovered a knife from the vehicle's floorboard, and state investigators reported that Mr. Blake admitted it was his.

Mr. Blake's lower body was paralyzed and he remains hospitalized. As for the sexual assault, he pled not guilty via video, posted a \$10,000 bond and waived a preliminary hearing. [Trial could take place](#) as early as November.

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Demonstrations and violence followed. As did visits by President Trump and his challenger, Mr. Joe Biden. Their views were predestined to clash. Focusing on the violence, the President praised law enforcement and the National Guard and [denied that racism had infected policing](#). As for Mr. Blake's shooting, his opinions seemed decidedly mixed:

Shooting the guy in the back many times. I mean, couldn't you have done something different? Couldn't you have wrestled him? You know, I mean, in the meantime, he might've been going for a weapon. And, you know, there's a whole big thing there.

In a controversial follow-on Mr. Trump likened what the officer did to a golfer who "chokes" while attempting a "three-foot putt."

Mr. Biden took a different tack. Focusing on the issue of race, he met with Mr. Blake's family, and in an hour-plus speech at a local church the candidate [bemoaned the plight of Black Americans](#) who must deal with White police: "I can't understand what it's like to walk out the door or send my son out the door or my daughter and worry about just because they're Black they may not come back."

During the afternoon hours of August 31st L.A. County sheriff's deputies were patrolling Westmont, an unincorporated neighborhood in the hard-stricken South Los Angeles area [when they came across a bicyclist](#) reportedly committing an unspecified moving violation. And when they flagged him down he dropped the bike and took off on foot, jacket in hand. ([Update](#): In a 9/17 news conference Sheriff's officials said that Mr. Kizzee had been riding on the wrong side of the street.)

A blurry security camera video depicts deputies chasing a large, burly man as he runs down a sidewalk. There's a protracted, violent tangle during which a deputy said he was punched in the face. Dijon Kizzee, 29, managed to free himself and resumed fleeing. Deputies said that's when he dropped the bundle he was carrying. A gun supposedly fell out, and Mr. Kizzee moved as if to grab it (but didn't). Mr. Kizzee then resumed fleeing (see image) but managed only one long stride before two deputies – [a supervisor and a trainee](#) – opened fire. Mortally wounded, Mr.



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Kizzee fell to the ground. ([Update](#): In a 9/17 “news briefing” Sheriff’s officials said that Mr. Kizzee picked up the gun and had it in hand when the deputies fired.)

Deputies discharged as many as fifteen shots. The handgun Mr. Kizzee allegedly possessed was recovered.

Gunfire by Kenosha police paralyzed Jacob Blake, likely permanently. Gunfire by L.A. Sheriff’s deputies killed Dijon Kizzee. Why did officers turn to lethal force?

We’ll start with Kenosha. With a population of about 100,000, [in 2018 its violent crime rate](#) of 338.2 came in slightly better than the national figure (368.9). That year its murder count was...four. In 2019 killings zoomed all the way to...five. So unlike, say, [Jackson](#) or, as we go on, South L.A.’s Westmont neighborhood, its cops should have little reason to feel they’re at war.

According to Kenosha police chief Daniel Miskinis [it was a combination of things](#). An outstanding arrest warrant may have produced a “heightened awareness” that, together with Mr. Blake’s resistance and possession of a knife, “changed the dynamics” of the encounter. Meaning, it made officers more likely to act defensively or, put another way, aggressively.

To be sure, individuals count. That warrant was for a crime of violence. And this wasn’t the first time that Mr. Blake had violently misbehaved. [According to a court file](#) reviewed by *USA Today*, in 2015 Racine (Wis.) police arrested Mr. Blake after he pulled a gun in a bar and became “combative” when confronted by officers. A firearm was recovered and he was charged with five counts. However, it seems that everything was ultimately dismissed. (For a detailed account of the incident click [here](#).)

What about the cop? Other than being White, [officer Rusten Sheskey](#) was thirty-one years old, had seven years on the job, and lacked any substantial disciplinary record. He also seemed very community-oriented. Indeed, [a year-old newspaper profile](#) depicted him in a very favorable light. Here’s an outtake from his comments during the interview:

What I like most is that you’re dealing with people on perhaps the worst day of their lives and you can try and help them as much as you can and make that day a little bit better. And that, for the most part, people trust us to do that for them. And it’s a huge responsibility, and I really like trying to help the people. We may not be able to make a situation right, or better, but we can maybe make it a little easier for them to handle during that time.

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Square that with shooting someone in the back. Your writer can't. Neither, apparently, can Mr. Joe Biden, [who quickly called](#) for the officer and his colleagues to be prosecuted.

[L.A.'s Westmont area](#) (2010 pop. 31,853), where the encounter between Sheriff's Deputies and Mr. Kizzee took place, is no Kenosha. Only three months earlier [deputies shot and killed](#) an 18-year old murder suspect who reportedly fired on them as he tried to get away. Westmont's most recent [six-month violent crime rate](#) of 413/100,000 (its projected full-year rate would be 826, more than twice Kenosha's) places it as the 27th most violent of Los Angeles' 272 neighborhoods. As one would expect, Westmont is also poor. A full *thirty percent* of its residents live in poverty, [nearly three times the U.S. figure](#) of 11.8 percent.

Might the implicit threat that Westmont presents affect officer decisions? Cops must frequently weigh the consequences to themselves and others of acting swiftly against delaying or trying to "de-escalate." Of course, the consequences of laying a wrong bet can be profound. [Let's self-plagiarize](#):

In the uncertain and often hostile environment of the streets, officers can find it impossible to quickly choreograph and implement a peaceful response. Bottom line: "slowing down" requires that cops occasionally accept considerable risk. Should their judgment be off, they can be easily hurt or killed. That's not ideology: it's just plain fact.

Officer temperaments vary. Crucial characteristics such as impulsivity and risk tolerance are all over the map. Citizen personalities also run the gamut. Factor in the violence, gun-slinging and lack of voluntary compliance that besets hard-hit areas, and the answer to our question seems clear: how could Westmont's nasty aura *not* count?

We know nothing about the deputies involved other than their ranks. However, plenty is known about Mr. Kizzee. [According to family members](#) he was an "unemployed plumber" who had served time in prison but "was trying to find his way." We obtained his criminal record through the [Los Angeles Superior Court website](#). Here's a condensed

CASE NO.	DATE	CHARGES	DISPO	SENTENCE
ATPMA079162-01	6/16/20	Bringing drugs into jail, battery on an officer	Pending	
XCNBA464078-01	1/3/18	Possession of firearm by prohibited person	Nolo (guilty)	28 mos. state prison
ATP8AN03322-01	3/23/18	Felony spousal abuse	Nolo (guilty)	180 days jail
SBAYA093627-01	1/16/16	Evading police; gun poss. by prohibited person	Nolo (guilty)	16 mos. state prison
XNOMA054124-01	9/21/11	Sale of meth, felony resisting	Nolo (guilty)	4 yrs. jail, 5 yrs. prob.

version:

Mr. Kizzee was a convicted felon. He also had felony charges pending when officers confronted him. As a felon, he was prohibited from possessing a gun, a crime for which he had already been twice convicted. He also had a track record of fighting police and trying to evade capture. Had he been again caught with a gun he would have likely been locked up for a very long time.

Kenosha's cops knew there was an active felony warrant for Mr. Blake. And when they stepped in he reacted violently. Taser strikes also had no more effect on Mr. Blake than on [Rayshard Brooks](#), the Atlanta man who fell asleep in a Wendy's drive-through. As for Mr. Kizzee, he also reacted violently. At this point we don't know whether either suspect was under the influence of drugs, but their conduct resembles that of others, such as Mr. Brooks and [George Floyd](#), whose "superhuman strength" and "lack of willingness to yield to overwhelming force" are characteristic of a syndrome that the [International Association of Chiefs of Police](#) and the [American College of Emergency Physicians](#) recognize as "excited delirium" (for more on that and a list of references click [here](#).)

So what *can* be done? Deploying a less-lethal alternative such as a Taser comes to mind. Unfortunately, darts are difficult to place and can be defeated by clothing. Conducted energy devices have proven ineffective on highly excited characters. They're also clumsy and time-consuming to properly deploy, and perhaps impossibly so should encounters turn dynamic. What's more, drawing a Taser leaves an officer with nothing substantial in hand should someone draw a gun. Given the ubiquity of armed characters such as Mr. Kizzee, that's a risk officers may be reluctant to take.

Fine. But is there a way to *prevent* the need to use a weapon? As essays in our "[Compliance and Force](#)" section (e.g., "[Making Time](#)", "[De-escalation](#)") frequently point out, not every situation calls for police intervention, and not every refusal to comply requires a forceful response. "Slowing things down," say, by using verbal skills, can prevent tragic misperceptions, such as thinking someone is going for a gun when they're actually reaching for a cell phone. It also affords an opportunity for backup officers, supervisors and crisis intervention teams to arrive.

Sounds good. But when circumstances turn dynamic, trying to "de-escalate" can give evil-doers the opportunity to go for a gun. And it's not just cops who may be placed at risk. Failure to contain a dangerous person can easily imperil innocents. Officers must also assess how a response squares with law and policy and, perhaps just as importantly,

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comports with the views of the colleagues on whom they depend for support. Should things turn out poorly, flouting accepted practice can shred one's reputation. What's more, officer personalities vary. As plentiful examples attest (see, for example, "[Speed Kills](#)") when things turn dicey some cops have proven so risk-averse or impulsive that they were simply incapable of holding off.

Back to Mr. Blake. Consider the options should even the best cop in the world encounter someone that obstinate and violent. Had he got away there would have likely been a vehicular pursuit, with all the attendant risks to both citizens and police. Choosing *not* to pursue would have by no means eliminated the danger he posed. Locating and safely arresting a forewarned fugitive ties up prodigious resources and, as your blogger can personally attest, carries exceptional personal risks as well. It's for reasons such as these that in the practical, everyday world of policing, dangerous characters aren't simply "let go."

To be sure, we're just scratching the surface. From choosing whether to intervene, to deciding how best to proceed, the police decision-making calculus can prove exceedingly complex. Alas, most of us reside in pleasant, middle-class environments and rarely interact with the dangerous, non-compliant folks whom officers encounter every day. So in these ideologically charged times, our "yes, but" sentiments will probably have little effect. Even so, if we'd like to minimize poor outcomes such as the crippling of Mr. Blake or the death of Mr. Kizzee, let's work to expand our understanding of *how* policing happens, and *why*. Then by all means, let's set out to improve the practice of this fascinating and highly demanding craft. Click [here](#) for a place to start.