

They were good guys with guns

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FULL TEXT

JEMEL ROBERSON was on the job as a security guard at a bar in the Chicago suburbs when a shooting broke out in the early hours of Nov. 11. He had detained the suspect at gunpoint when police arrived and - seeing a black man with a gun - shot and killed the 26-year-old. A "tragic incident," said the Midlothian police chief, noting the department was "completely saddened" and offering "heartfelt condolences."

Less than two weeks later, on Thanksgiving night, gunfire erupted at a shopping mall in Alabama and police again ended up shooting the wrong person, another young black man. Killed by an off-duty police officer working security at the Riverchase Galleria was 21-year-old Emantic Fitzgerald Bradford Jr. A "chaotic scene" was the description of the Hoover Police Department, reporting that Mr. Bradford had a gun that "heightened the sense of threat" to police. Mr. Bradford's family pointed out he was licensed to carry a firearm, that it's not illegal to carry a gun in public in Alabama and that he likely pulled it out trying to protect shoppers.

The two shootings raise issues that are central to the national debate about the troubling racial disparities that exist in law enforcement and the use of lethal force by police. They underscore that African Americans are more likely to be shot and killed by police than their white peers. There are particular dangers faced by African American gun owners when they interact with police. Who can forget, for example, how Philando Castile was killed after he told a Minnesota police officer who had pulled him over that he had a legal firearm and was shot while reaching for his wallet to provide proof?

"It's the continued narrative that we see of shoot first, ask questions later," said a minister at one of the churches where Mr. Roberson assisted. "If you happen to be black, police see you as a criminal and they shoot and kill you," said an attorney representing Mr. Bradford's family.

Both recent shootings are the subjects of ongoing investigations. There are many unanswered questions, and authorities in both incidents need to be much more forthcoming about the circumstances that resulted in the deaths of these two innocent men. Particularly troubling have been the drastically shifting accounts of officials in Alabama.

The fatal shootings also undermine the contention of gun rights extremists that the solution to gun violence is not sensible gun safety regulation but rather arming more people. "If they had protection inside, the results would have been far better," President Trump said after 11 people were killed at a synagogue in Pittsburgh. Mr. Roberson was the National Rifle Association's proverbial "good guy with a gun," and he ended up dead, leaving behind a 9-month-old child and another baby on the way. That Mr. Bradford was killed while the real shooter escaped illustrates the chaos and confusion that accompany shootings and the fact that even those whose job is to protect the public make mistakes that result in terrible tragedy.

Credit: Editorial Board

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