

An Alabama Mall Shooting, a Black Man's Death, and a Debate Over Race and Guns

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

After police in Alabama fatally shot a 21-year-old black man whom they mistook for a suspect, critics have claimed a double standard in enforcing gun rights.

FULL TEXT

HOOVER, Ala. —After gunshots rang out in a cavernous suburban shopping mall on Thanksgiving night, Ashlyn McMillan encountered a man she considered a hero. He directed frantic shoppers to safety, hand on his gun to defend against a looming threat. "Get down," Ms. McMillan recalled him saying. "Go in the store."

Yet to a police officer who raced to the scene in Hoover, Ala., the black man with the gun was not a hero in action, but "a suspect brandishing a pistol," according to a police account. The officer fired at him, and the man, Emantic Fitzgerald Bradford Jr., died.

As it turned out, Mr. Bradford was not the gunman the police had been searching for. On Thursday, police arrested someone else —Erron Martez Dequan Brown, 20, and charged him with attempting to murder an 18-year-old man who was shot during the melee.

The correction was too late for Mr. Bradford, whom the police initially identified as the culprit, only to change their story a day later. Mr. Bradford had not shot anyone, the Hoover police said, but was a licensed gun owner at a chaotic scene in the crowded mall.

The two competing versions of what Mr. Bradford, who was 21, did that night —try to protect those in danger or pose a serious threat by wielding a gun during a moment of chaos —are at the center of a controversy over race, gun rights and bias that has erupted in this predominantly white suburb outside of Birmingham, and led to protests.

The incident has called into question the veracity of a popular slogan among Second Amendment enthusiasts: "The best way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun." Black people trying to protect themselves or others with a gun may not have gotten the benefit of the doubt in recent heat-of-the-moment situations.

This month, before Mr. Bradford's killing, the police fatally shot a black security guard who had pulled his gun to try to break up a shooting in a suburban Chicago bar. A Portland State University policeman fatally shot a black Navy veteran who, witnesses said, had been trying to break up a fight outside of a bar when his firearm fell to the ground during the scuffle. Both men were licensed to carry.

And in St. Louis last year, a black off-duty police officer was shot and wounded by a white colleague after the black officer had taken his service weapon out to help officers trying to catch suspects near his home.

In Hoover, Mr. Bradford's family members and activists have accused the officer of being too quick to assume that because Mr. Bradford was a black man with a gun, he was a threat rather than a good Samaritan, and fired right away.

"As a black man, even a black woman, having a gun automatically puts you in danger," said April Pipkins, Mr. Bradford's mother. "Why is there a perception that with every black man or every black woman, there's a gun, they're going for it, like we just kill people to kill people."

Black residents said Hoover is a town with a reputation of being unwelcoming to black people, having grown out of

the white flight of decades past.

Much remains unclear about what led to Mr. Bradford's death on the opening evening of the holiday shopping season at the Riverchase Galleria, the state's largest indoor mall. Witnesses have said they did not see Mr. Bradford pointing his gun at people or hear the police shouting commands before shooting him.

Those details will be important as investigators determine whether the shooting was legally justified. In chaotic situations, officers can have just a split second to make life-or-death decisions, and the presence of firearms only complicates things, experts say. In fact, Hoover officials said in a news release that Mr. Bradford's decision to pull his gun "instantly heightened the sense of threat to approaching police officers."

Under intense public scrutiny, the city has since gone to great lengths publicly and privately to atone for the killing of Mr. Bradford, who received a general discharge from the Army in August after sustaining an injury during basic training, his mother said.

Officials met with Mr. Bradford's family to offer their condolences, and they postponed a Christmas tree lighting ceremony, urging people to pray for the family instead. They also made the unusual step of asking the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency, which has taken control of the investigation, to permit them to release all the information, including video footage, that they had on the case so far.

If the agency did not approve the request by noon on Monday, the police chief would consider releasing the information anyway, said Derrick Murphy, the only black Hoover city councilman.

"Praying is the least we can do for the Bradford family," Mr. Murphy said during a news conference on Thursday morning that ended with a prayer. "I know time is important."

Mr. Bradford went to the Galleria often and he was there last Thursday night to shop and, like many young people in the area, hang out with friends.

Ms. McMillan, an 18-year-old college student from Tuscaloosa, was there waiting for a friend in front of Foot Action on the second level when she saw several young men arguing outside of the store and then heard a gunshot.

John C. Robbins, a lawyer for Brian Wilson, the 18-year-old who was injured during the incident, said his client had been arguing with Mr. Brown, who was arrested by federal marshals on Thursday at a relative's house in South Fulton, Ga. The lawyer said that Mr. Bradford was not involved.

The first gunshot, Mr. Robbins said, hit Mr. Wilson in the stomach. A 12-year-old girl was also shot at the mall that night, but it remains unclear who was responsible.

Ms. McMillan, the witness, recalled seeing Mr. Bradford urging people to take cover. She saw his hand on his holstered gun at one point, she said, but was unsure if he ever actually took it out.

About a minute after the initial gunshots, Ms. McMillan said another barrage came without warning; she did not hear any police commands. Mr. Bradford, she said, fell to the floor from the bullets.

"Just like in a movie, it was like everything slowed down," Ms. McMillan said. "You just saw his body just hit the ground so hard, his head bounced. It was just horrific."

While he strongly supports black people protecting themselves with firearms when they are in danger, Philip Smith, the president of the National African-American Gun Association, said it was also important for black gun owners to take extra precautions, which might mean walking away from a situation without drawing a weapon.

"When you walk up to a situation as an officer, I think a lot of times there's an assumption that the black guy is the issue or the problem," Mr. Smith said. "When you have those stereotypes that are ingrained in your mind, it can be a death warrant for a lot of our black men, unfortunately."

The city has not released any information about the officer who shot Mr. Bradford and it did not respond to repeated inquiries. The state agency investigating the case declined to comment.

Hoover has a population of 85,000. Though the city is diversifying, civil rights leaders have criticized structural barriers—from zoning ordinances to the school district breaking away from the county—that they say have kept the suburban enclave 72 percent white.

It is one of the suburbs that black people in the metropolitan area tell other black people to avoid, or, if they must go, to drive carefully and be on their best behavior to avoid the intense scrutiny of local law enforcement.

The city's reputation never stopped Mr. Bradford from going there, much to his mother's concern. His killing, Ms. Pipkins said, was a culmination of that concern.

"If you look at that situation," she said, "we know we're not really welcome here."

Credit: John Eligon

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