

Say Her Name: Natasha McKenna

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Forged from the remnants of slavery and driven by racially discriminative practices, the current American criminal justice system is imbedded with outdated practices, improperly trained officers and staff, and is in need of much reform. Black people in the United States of America have continuously struggled and fought for racial equality and justice. From slave revolts and uprisings, to the Civil Right Movement, African Americans have been on a continual journey to access to the same freedoms as our white counterparts. These movements are majorly the direct result of tragedy in the African American community. Southern lynchings led to the increased desire for human and voting rights. The gruesome death of Emmitt Till, and his mother's decision to have an open casket service, was a major propellant for the Civil Rights Movement. As social justice movements surge through the United States, many of these movements center around the treatment of African Americans and those wrongfully discriminated against by the criminal justice system. Specifically, the Black Lives Matter movement brought many of the systemic issues plaguing the Black community to the media forefront. From the initial Black Lives Matter movement surfacing following the death of a teenage boy who was gunned down by George Zimmerman, Trayvon Martin in 2012, stemmed other movements highlighting other prominent issues in other communities. The Say Her Name movement began in 2015 as a way to expose the atrocities imposed on Black women that were less mainstream than the killings of Black men. The movement told the story of victims such as Rekia Boyd, a Chicago woman who was fatally shot by an off duty police detective. This movement gained a major following succeeding the arrest and death of Sandra Bland, a woman who was arrested during a traffic stop, and was later found hanged in her cell. As these

movements grew, other stories of victims of police violence surfaced (*A brief history of civil rights in the United states: The Black Lives Matter movement* 2018).

Natasha McKenna was born on January 9, 1978, and lived in Fairfax County, Virginia. She was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia at a young age (Pratt, 2020). On January 25, 2015, McKenna called 911 to report an assault. When officers responded, she agreed to go to the hospital for examination. McKenna later decided not to continue the investigation, but it was soon discovered that she had outstanding warrants involving the assault of an officer in neighboring Alexandria. She was taken to the Fairfax County Jail the following day. While awaiting transport to an Alexandria facility, McKenna had allegedly begun to exhibit erratic behavior. On January 31, 2015, one officer at the Fairfax County Jail reported that McKenna had assaulted them after an attempt to barricade her cell door with a mattress. The officer stated that McKenna began trying to scratch and bite the officers, causing the need to be restrained (Jackman, 2019). On February 3, 2015, Natasha McKenna was to be prepared for transport, but as her mental health continued to decline, officers report that she, once again, began to behave erratically and was uncooperative. Six officers, three dressed in full bio-hazard protection gear, were present as McKenna was removed from her cell completely nude. She was then handcuffed and lowered to the ground as her legs were restrained. A spit hood was then placed on her head as she struggled with officers. McKenna was placed in a transport chair but was then again lowered to the ground, as officers discovered her physical size would not allow for proper restraint. She was then placed in a restraint chair (Jackman, 2019). As officers adjusted her constraints, McKenna became increasingly agitated, kicking and flailing her body. Officers attempted to subdue her using a taser, but she continued to writhe in her restraints. Natasha

McKenna was tased a total of four times during this ordeal that lasted about forty five minutes. Following enduring four charges, her heart stopped. McKenna was later pronounced dead at Inova Fairfax Hospital on February 8, 2015, after being on life support for five days. The cause of death was ruled accidental, as the autopsy concluded that McKenna's heart stopped as a result of "excited delirium", labeling her schizophrenia as a contributing factor (Bureau, 2015).

Prosecutors did not press charges against the deputies involved, and after review, the prosecution believed that there was no malicious intent, and that the deputies acted accordingly. Sheriff Stacey Kincaid then released a video documenting the entire cell extraction. The family of Natasha McKenna then sued the deputies and sheriffs involved. The family eventually reached a settlement in the wrongful death case in 2018 that would go to McKenna's daughter (June, 2019).

At the spark of a newly formed social justice movement, a case surrounding a mentally disabled Black woman conjured up controversy in the media. The details provided about Natasha McKenna's death led many to believe that the conflict was an act of racially motivated police brutality (Pratt, 2020). Her physical size alone became a major contribution to the misconduct accusations. McKenna was measured at five feet, three inches, and weighed only one hundred thirty pounds, yet six officers were sent to extract her from her cell. Her size also prolonged the restraining process. She was placed in a restraint chair in the manner in which it transpired, because McKenna was physically too small for the attached restraints to be used properly. This elongated procedure only heightened the mental issues she was experiencing. As a result she became increasingly irritable and distraught. She struggled with officers and was subsequently

tased with four total charges. These taser jolts sent over 50,000 volts of charge throughout McKenna's body

(Burley, 2017). The voltage coupled with her increased heart rate and blood pressure led McKenna's family and those in association with the Black Lives Matter movement to believe the taser charges were the ultimate cause of death. Because tasers are not commonly referred to as lethal weapons, they are not as regulated as other weapons, however, experts mention that accidental death due to tasers is tragically due to misuse of the instrument, and this misuse can cause cardiac arrest, like in Natasha McKenna's case. It should also be noted that over 90 percent of taser related death victims are unarmed (Burley, 2017). Though prosecutors found no fault in the deputies involved, details pertaining to McKenna's condition and the release of video evidence revealed deeper points of concern for those involved in the movement. Taking her size into consideration, many deemed four charges excessive for even someone much larger than McKenna, especially while majorly constrained and surrounded by six deputies. Considering her mental state at the time of the incident, those reviewing the incident could also conclude that the entire approach to the extraction could have been approached differently. Experts believed that someone in McKenna's mental state should have been treated as a patient and less like a prisoner, as her mental conditions were known to officers (Burley, 2017). Those diagnosed with mental disabilities are too often victims of police brutality and violence. This is due to a lack of mental health training and monitoring. Only thirty two of five hundred officers in the facility received crisis intervention training. While all officers have received at least ten hours of basic mental health

training, only about eighty of those deputies received specific mental health situation training. (Jouvenal, 2015).

In response to the wrongful death of Natasha McKenna, Sheriff Stacey Kincaid implemented a diversion program that would divert mentally ill offenders into treatment facilities

rather than letting them remain in a jail setting. Officers in the Fairfax County jail also no longer use tasers to avoid another incident of misuse (June, 2019).

As the Black Lives Matter and the Say Her Name movements gained traction, stories such as Natasha McKenna's added depth to the discussion of treatment of African American citizens by police officers and other officers of the law. Succeeding the deaths of Eric Garner, a New York man who died after being put in a chokehold by an officer, and Micheal Brown, a teenager who died from a gunshot wound inflicted by a police officer, McKenna's death forced the public to take a closer look into the practices of law enforcement, and how a disproportionate amount of excessively violent acts are targeted towards the African American community; men and women alike. Like those mentioned before her, their untimely deaths caused an insurgency in the Black community. These losses birthed protests and riots that grabbed national attention. They displayed not only the unlawful treatment of African Americans in the United States, but delved into the engraved racism present. The immediate reaction to the protests and riots shed a brighter light on the gravity of racism in this country, more so than the actual brutality. Following the death of Michael Brown, for example, riots broke out in Ferguson, MO. These riots that were once peaceful protests, were met with military presence and swat teams, furthering the gap between African American citizens and the police. Several arrests were made, and many of those

participating in protests were charged with inciting riots. These events also raised tension throughout the country, as law enforcement became more violent towards peaceful protests, specifically those related to the Black Lives Matter movement (*A brief history of civil rights in the United states: The Black Lives Matter movement* 2018).

Though ruled accidental, the death of Natasha McKenna revealed to the public how deeply rooted in corruption the correctional system is. The nearly forty five minute video exposed how excessive violence is often deemed “necessary” or “appropriate “ when handling uncooperative inmates, and is commonly used as a subduction tool versus de escalation methods. Though McKenna physically resisted, she posed no real threat to the six officers that would render four taser charges acceptable. The video also revealed how mental capacity is often not taken into consideration when interacting with detainees. McKenna’s case should inspire reform not only for the treatment of African Americans in the penal system, but the mentally ill as well, as these are the two most predominant demographics that are abused by the system. If the Fairfax facility, as well as facilities across the country, implemented rehabilitation practices rather than carrying out acts of force, Natasha McKenna, and many of those with similar stories, would not have become victims to a system that should be used for improvement, not punishment.

As an officer of the law, it is important to ensure the safety of those in the vicinity, including the safety of a detainee. So often, the criminal status of a victim of racially charged police brutality is used to validate an officer’s actions, and the victim is considered “guilty until proven innocent.” This imposes a stigma that Black people are inherently more criminal and violent and deserve

the treatment they receive. Being an African American officer in the current criminal justice system imposes a greater responsibility of protecting and giving back to a community most deeply affected by corruption. African American men and women are more likely to be exposed to racial profiling by law enforcement. They are also more likely to become victims of police brutality (Jouvenal, 2015). Police should not be present to evoke fear into the public, but rather give the public, including Black Americans, a sense of security. A new

restructuring of the criminal justice system is needed to ensure that the police are trained in de-escalation tactics rather than resulting in violent methods that disproportionately affect the African American community. As more changes continue to be made, it is important that those entering the criminal justice system know the importance of progress. We as a country can no longer uphold some of the systems that were established previously, as they no longer serve the values that the United States should emulate. We should not only recognize the issues that have destroyed so much of the African American community, but put forth effort into reversing the generations of neglect. The criminal system needs to implement programs that eradicate recidivism and support those affected by time in the penal system.

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