

## Police Killing of Foster Child Ma'Khia Bryant in Ohio Wrenches Youth, Allies

Megan Conn and Michael Fitzgerald, The Imprint, April 22, 2021

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Foster youth across Ohio and nationwide, along with top officials in the Biden administration, are speaking out in horror this week about the police killing of a Black teenager in front of her foster home in Columbus, Ohio.

News of the fatal shooting of 16-year-old Ma'Khia Bryant on Tuesday shook the nation just hours after a jury in Minnesota delivered a verdict in the George Floyd case, and days after two other youth of color were killed by police in other states.

For current and former foster youth, bearing witness to Ma'Khia's violent death as the officer's body camera footage spread on social media has been excruciating.

Former Ohio foster youth and founding member of the advocacy group FosterStrong Adrian McLemore sees any young person in foster care as a sibling, he wrote in an emotional Facebook post on Wednesday. For him, Ma'Khia's slaying was a death in the family.

"Her name is Ma'Khia Bryant — and she was fighting for her life," McLemore wrote, posting his message alongside a video from Ma'Khia's Tik Tok account that shows her as a carefree teen, styling her curly hair and posing for the camera. "The State failed her AGAIN. We failed her AGAIN."

Although there is still much to be learned about the circumstances of her life and death, the Columbus city government took the unusual step of immediately releasing body camera footage from the incident and 911 calls, which capture a chaotic, violent scene that unfolded with shocking speed.

In the footage, Ma'Khia appears to be holding a knife and moving toward another young woman in the seconds before she was shot. The white officer who is seen shooting her four times in the chest, Nicholas Reardon, has been placed on administrative leave pending the investigation, the police department announced Wednesday.

"I sure as hell wish it hadn't happened," interim Columbus police Chief Michael Woods said in a news conference.

In a sign of the extraordinary times the nation finds itself in following international protests over police killings and the departure of former President Donald Trump, news of Ma'Khia's death prompted a quick and sympathetic response from White House press secretary Jen Psaki, who confirmed that President Joe Biden had been briefed on the matter.

"The killing of 16-year-old Ma'Khia Bryant was tragic: She was a child," Psaki said during her news briefing Wednesday. "We also know that there are particular vulnerabilities that children in foster care, like Ma'Khia, face."

The federal agency responsible for child welfare regulations and funding, the U.S. Children's Bureau, also expressed grief over Ma'Khia's death and described her as "an honor student" who was "temporarily" in foster care.

"The loss of any child is a tragedy not only for the family, but also the community. As we think of Ma'Khia Bryant's family and the community impacted by her loss of life, we can only imagine the agony they must feel. They deserve to understand the events involving her death," Aysha Schomburg, the Biden-appointed associate commissioner of the Children's Bureau, wrote in an emailed statement to The Imprint.

"Her loss is felt even more significantly, knowing that children who come into care have already experienced varying degrees of trauma," she added.

Before Ma'Khia was killed, she had been in the care of Franklin County Children's Services (FCCS), a roughly \$330 million local agency responsible for about 4,000 children in 2020, according to county data. County and federal figures from recent years show that 38% of Franklin County's foster youth were teenagers between ages 12 and 17, which is higher than the 27% national average. As of late 2018, children of color were highly overrepresented in the county system, with 56% identified as African-American or "multiracial" in recent data, even though they represent only 26% of the county's overall child population.

Advocates for youth have long criticized Ohio for failing to invest in child welfare; until Gov. DeWine doubled the children's services budget in 2019, it spent the fewest tax dollars per capita on foster care of any state. Long-simmering complaints centered on how teens in the system are treated, particularly Black youth, and the state's shortage of foster homes amid a decadelong opioid epidemic.

“There is no question that there is a disparity in the experience of African American children and families in Ohio’s children services system,” wrote Matt Damschroder, interim director of the state’s Department of Job and Family Services. Damschroder’s comments were shared in a recent letter introducing a report titled: “How Racism In The Ohio Child Services System Impacts The Lives of Individuals Involved.”

Last November, after completing a yearlong study, a 21-member commission convened by Gov. Mike DeWine (R) released dozens of recommendations for improving children’s services. The report warned that child welfare agencies must strive to meet not only children’s safety needs, but also their need for well-being and permanency.

“Without the understanding that all three needs are fundamental and interconnected,” the commission wrote, “children entering foster care will continue to be further traumatized by the very system meant to protect and care for them.”

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Franklin County declined to answer questions from The Imprint about Ma’Khia’s foster care placement in a modest, well-maintained two-story home in southeast Columbus, visible in the background of the police video of her death. In a statement released earlier in the week, Children’s Services confirmed only that Ma’Khia was in the agency’s care and that she was 16 years old.

“This was a tragic incident and FCCS is continuing its involvement with the family throughout this difficult time,” read the statement.

The New York Times reported Thursday that Ma’Khia had entered foster care on Valentine’s Day this year and was staying in the family foster home with two other children, including her sister.

In an interview with a local news station, her mother, Paula Bryant, said Ma’Khia was named after a prophet in the Bible. “Ma’Khia had a motherly nature about her. She promoted peace,” she said.

It will be days or weeks before a state investigative body determines whether the use of deadly force by officer Reardon was justified, and opinion among both eyewitnesses and viewers is split. But watching the brutal death of another Black teen at the hands of police has left many reeling - and government leaders grappling with the state's failure to protect a vulnerable child entrusted to its care.

"Did Ma'Khia Bryant need to die yesterday? How did we get here?" asked Columbus Mayor Andrew Ginther (D). "This is a failure on the part of our community. Some are guilty, but all of us are responsible."

Columbus Public Safety Director Ned Pettus Jr. called the teen's death "devastating."

"She could be my grandchild. My heart breaks for her family tonight," Pettus said. "No matter what the circumstances, they are in agony, and they are in my prayers."

Jamole Callahan, a former Ohio foster youth who is now a motivational speaker, also shared his heartbreak.

"I am saddened. Not because she was a teen in foster care, but that she was a teen," Callahan said. "A teenager who had so much more life to live and give. A life that in 12 seconds was taken away."

The loss of someone so young seemed to unite the city in grief over the kind of tragedy that has torn countless American families and communities apart.

"This should never have happened," her mother told the television station. Bryant held back tears as she recalled a hopeful visit last Thursday with her daughter, who she described as a "loving" child.

The two hugged, and Ma'Khia said: "Mommy, I made the honor roll," Bryant recalled. "I'm looking forward to coming home."