

Cops and Robbers, Part 1: The Rise of Wayne Jenkins

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Wayne Jenkins was living a double life.

He was already an admired leader of aggressive street squads and would go on to head the elite Gun Trace Task Force, one of the Baltimore Police Department's go-to assets in the fight against violent crime. He was also the ringleader of a criminal enterprise of police officers who were robbing people and dealing drugs.

The indictment of Jenkins and six of his gun task force officers on federal racketeering charges rocked Baltimore when the announcement came in March 2017. A squad of veteran police officers stood accused of committing numerous robberies, as well as extortion and overtime fraud. Many Baltimore residents had long distrusted the police, and more so after the death of Freddie Gray. But the scope and breadth of these allegations were staggering.



Jenkins and members of his squad were praised for their work getting guns off the streets in an October 2016 police department newsletter. Baltimore, Maryland. October, 2019. Image by Baltimore Police

Inside the police department, the Gun Trace Task Force was known for its success in capturing suspected drug dealers, their stashes and their illegal firearms. And Jenkins, who'd been identified as a rising talent early in his career, was celebrated among department brass and rank and file officers as a leader with an uncanny knack for delivering the goods. One officer recalled Jenkins taunting colleagues waiting in line to submit evidence at police headquarters, bragging about how many guns he was getting off the street. "He was like King Kong," the officer, who still works for the police department, recalled. "I thought, 'How is he doing it? Why can't I be like this guy?'"

When Jenkins was on paternity leave, commanders grouched that his squad's productivity dropped. They urged his supervisors to "get him back to work and focused," according to an internal police department investigation conducted after the indictments. Maurice Ward, a former detective now serving a seven-year prison term for committing crimes with Jenkins, said he and other officers jockeyed to get on his team. "If Wayne Jenkins asked you to come work for him, you felt honored," Ward said.

Jenkins earned praise outside the department, too. Then-Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake held a news conference to tout one of Jenkins' big drug busts. The Parkville American Legion Post named him its Officer of the Year. If his arrest was stunning, the depiction of his civil rights violations, robberies and more wasn't news to everyone — certainly not to people who had been in Jenkins' sights, fairly or not, over the years. Some drug dealers told their lawyers that Jenkins made stuff up to arrest them — and had kept a good chunk of their money and drugs before taking them in. For the most part, these defendants decided it wasn't in their interest to tell government authorities that. They might not have been believed anyhow.

Still, a yearlong investigation by The Baltimore Sun found warning signs that Wayne Jenkins wasn't such a good cop. His supervisors and others either failed to see the red flags — or chose to ignore them.

- From 2006 to 2009, Jenkins was the subject of at least four lawsuits alleging misconduct. The plaintiffs prevailed in three of them, either through a jury verdict or the city's decision to settle the case. But the suits triggered no internal punishment by the police department.
- Despite the lawsuits — and later, video evidence from his squad's body cameras — Jenkins' supervisors failed to scrutinize the arrests he was making. He was getting suspects off the street, but his cases often weren't holding up in court.
- A surveillance video suggesting Jenkins may have planted drugs in a suspect's car did make its way to the police integrity unit of the Baltimore state's attorney's office in 2014. Prosecutors investigated and even presented evidence to a grand jury but concluded they didn't have enough evidence to obtain an indictment.
- The same video led to a rare police department disciplinary case against Jenkins, who was internally charged with misconduct in 2015, according to a copy of the case file reviewed by The Sun. Investigators recommended Jenkins be demoted and suspended without pay. The department's Internal Affairs chief at the time says then-Deputy Commissioner Darryl De Sousa intervened to prevent the punishment. De Sousa, who later served as commissioner and is currently serving time on federal tax charges, says he doesn't remember the case.

These misconduct allegations came as Jenkins was serving in various plainclothes units — well before his appointment in 2016 to head the Gun Trace Task Force, one of the department's most celebrated plainclothes squads. While Jenkins' most serious crimes — the drug dealing, the robberies — appear to have been well hidden, it is not surprising they flourished within Baltimore's permissive plainclothes culture.

These units often operated with little supervision. They had the autonomy to catch and release suspects and develop informants. They employed tactics that straddled — and sometimes clearly crossed — the line that divides aggressive policing and trampling on civil rights. Amid controversies over the years, police brass would publicly disband the units, then reconstitute them with the same personnel under a different name. The department valued their work too much to end this style of police work.

Plainclothes officers “made the most arrests, they seized the most drugs and money, assets,” former Police Commissioner Kevin Davis told The Sun. “That creates a culture — it's not unique to Baltimore, but it's pronounced here — that those guys should be given a pass,” Davis said.

Just how long ago Jenkins began stealing isn't clear. His earliest admitted theft was in 2011. By the time his criminal streak was in full swing, it entailed high-stakes robberies and breaking and entering — even as he was bringing in paychecks totaling over \$170,000 in a year, in part because of overtime fraud. According to Jenkins' convicted partner in the drug dealing, the police sergeant had been stealing drugs off the street for years and profiting from their illegal sale. Some of his men also have acknowledged stealing well before they came together on the Gun Trace Task Force in 2016.



Federal prosecutors displayed the contents of a bag found in the trunk of Sgt. Wayne Jenkins' police vehicle when he was arrested in 2017. The bag contained masks and other gear he used while stealing drugs and cash from people he and his team targeted. Baltimore, Maryland. 2017, Image by U.S. Attorney's Office.

To learn more about their behavior, The Sun obtained several thousand pages of court records, dozens of body camera videos and hundreds of police department emails and restricted internal files. A reporter also reviewed videos of judicial proceedings stemming from the officers' arrests.

More than 50 people — including current and former police officers, prosecutors, defense attorneys and victims — were interviewed. Jenkins, who is serving a 25-year sentence in a federal prison in South Carolina, declined to speak with The Sun. Some defense attorneys say their clients told them Jenkins had robbed them. But most people who worked with him — police and prosecutors — asserted to The Sun they had no idea he and his officers were involved in criminal behavior.

After the indictments, one of Jenkins' supervisors told Internal Affairs investigators she had believed he was "the best gun cop this department has ever seen." Reflecting on the revelations of his misconduct, Lt. Marjorie German concluded that department leaders gave Jenkins too much leeway — because they were enamored of his results. Jenkins gave "150 percent on the street. ... And that is what they want," German said, according to an Internal Affairs report. "Command created the monster," she said, "and allowed it to go unchecked."

'FLAWLESS CHARACTER'

Jenkins entered a department steeped in "zero tolerance" — a war on crime fueled by arrests for even minor infractions. On an oddly balmy January night, Jenkins and Fries were working the McElderry Park neighborhood in East Baltimore when they noticed two brothers drinking Steel Reserve beers on the sidewalk outside their rowhouse. No one had called police to complain, but Jenkins and Fries told the men to go inside. When the officers circled back later, the two were still outside holding beers.

Jenkins said he'd tried to be "nice," but now they were going to jail. When one of the men darted into his home, Jenkins rushed in after him. Then they spilled out of the house and onto the sidewalk, struggling.

"All this happened over nothing," one of the brothers, Charles Lee, recalled recently. The two police officers "came over because they had nothing else to do." As backup arrived, Jenkins spotted a man named George Sneed across the street. Arrest him, too, Jenkins yelled at the responding officers. Jenkins and Fries would later say in sworn depositions that Sneed had been yelling expletives about police and throwing glass bottles at them. The bottles were "winged at us. I mean, it had velocity," Jenkins said. Sneed hired an attorney, who obtained footage from a city surveillance camera on the corner. It showed Sneed calmly standing across the street looking on, never even raising his arms. The tape disputed Jenkins' sworn account. But there was just enough room for doubt — Sneed had been off camera briefly — that Jenkins could argue the video didn't show the full story.

The jury found against the officer who broke Sneed's jaw but cleared Jenkins. But overall, plaintiffs prevailed in at least three lawsuits accusing Jenkins of beatings or other misconduct from 2006 to 2009, resulting in \$90,000 in taxpayer payouts. None of the cases led to any police department discipline for Jenkins, his personnel records show.

In the annals of the Baltimore Police Department, Wayne Jenkins' name was not being associated with wrongdoing. Far from it.

A RISING STAR

Jenkins was developing a reputation within the department as a cop whose aggressive style brought results. Current and former officers said he was generally regarded favorably as a "cowboy" type who found big cases through a frenetic pace of citizen stops, which sometimes yielded information leading the way up a chain of drug dealers.

"Wayne was a cop's cop, local hero kind of guy," said Cirello, the retired officer.

Jenkins got a bronze star for his part in the 2009 recovery of 41 kilograms of cocaine — \$1 million worth — in a man's truck. It was billed at the time as the largest cocaine seizure in department history, one of Jenkins' many large-scale seizures.

While it may seem incongruous that an officer would be hailed as a hero while racking up complaints, in the Baltimore Police Department it was not. Wayne Jenkins and his plainclothes colleagues operated in a world where success and misconduct were not mutually exclusive — and sometimes seemed to go hand in hand.

'KNOCKERS'

Officers in plainclothes units often operate in the shadows of a police department. Their work is not to be confused with undercover operations, in which police officers assume a different identity and worm their way into a criminal organization. Plainclothes officers, as the description suggests, just work in street clothes — usually casual — rather than uniforms. The outfit change is designed to allow them to blend in. They drive unmarked vehicles. They are not typically tethered to specific posts, or burdened

by responding to 911 calls. Instead, they go out looking for illegal activity — people exchanging drugs or displaying bulges under clothing that could be guns. These officers often operate with a great deal of independence. They can let a suspect go, if they can lead to bigger fish.

In Baltimore, they're often referred to as "knockers," a reference to their historically aggressive tactics. Across the country, these plainclothes squads have often been where scandals are born. In Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Chicago, plainclothes teams have been charged with corruption. But Davis, Baltimore's police commissioner from 2015 to 2018 and a veteran of two other departments, calls plainclothes units "necessary and critical to the crime fight." They go looking for guns and drugs, he said, and often are successful.

"It's a Viking mentality: You go out into the field among the bad guys, and you bring back a bounty," Davis said. In Baltimore's recent history, the police department has consistently relied on such units, even though the conduct of many of their officers would draw criticism from city residents.

IN THE CROSSHAIRS

Jenkins, along with Detective Ben Frieman, had followed an African American man driving a nice car through Northeast Baltimore. When the man stopped his car and started to run away, Jenkins drove after him and into someone's front yard, where he struck him. The man, Demetric Simon, 31, said he did have drugs on him and knew someone was following. He was scared. He thought Jenkins and Frieman might have been impersonating police.

"At that time, I didn't think they were officers," Simon said. Jenkins later alleged in official paperwork that Simon had pointed a weapon at Frieman — and that he ran Simon down to stop the threat. And while searching the area, Jenkins claimed, he found a BB gun under a nearby car. But during the subsequent investigation, Frieman told detectives that he never saw a gun in Simon's hand and that — rather than being in imminent danger — he was around a corner and out of sight when Jenkins ran down Simon.

In a recent interview, Simon told The Sun, "I never had no BB gun. I never aimed nothing at him He ran me over because I was getting away." His account — and Jenkins' claim that he'd found the gun — is evocative of testimony by two of Jenkins' officers in the 2018 Gun Trace Task Force trial. They said Jenkins instructed them to carry BB guns to plant on suspects to justify their actions if they made a mistake.

Five years later, Simon's claims were confirmed. An officer who sometimes worked with Jenkins, Keith Gladstone, pleaded guilty last month to going to the scene of Simon's arrest to plant the BB gun — a response, Gladstone admitted, to a phone call from a frantic Jenkins asking for the help. Back then, Jenkins escaped scrutiny again. Though Simon says he reported the incident to the police department's Internal Affairs office, he ultimately stopped cooperating on advice from his defense lawyer. He had a criminal case to fight, and his freedom was more important.