

Cops and Robbers, Part 3: Monsters

By Justin Fenton, Kevin Richardson, Caroline Pate, Mathieu Lalumiere

“I need you to come here as quick as you can,” Jenkins told him. “I’ve got a ‘monster.’”

He was not making a moral judgment. “Monster” was Jenkins' term for those higher-level players in Baltimore’s black-market economy who stacked bricks of packaged drugs and cash. Finding such dealers had become a principal focus of Jenkins’ work — so he could rob them. Arresting them was optional. He toted around a duffel bag in the back of his van that contained a burglar’s toolkit, ready for such opportunities. The implements were to allow Jenkins to break into a monster’s home or stash house, one of his officers would later testify.

The well-regarded police sergeant wasn’t just stealing cash. He was raiding the dealers’ supply, giving the product to the bondsman to sell on the street. They shared the profit, thousands of dollars per heist. Successful plainclothes policing is dependent on an officer being taken at his word. After the death of Freddie Gray in 2015 and the U.S. Justice Department report that found widespread civil rights abuses by Baltimore police, trust in the police department seemed at an all-time low.



Federal prosecutors say this array of tools was recovered from a bag in the back of Wayne Jenkins’ police department van. Baltimore, Maryland, 2019. Image by U.S. Attorney's Office.

But an investigation by The Baltimore Sun found that the officers of the Gun Trace Task Force still had trust where it mattered most: within the police department, among the prosecutors who took their cases and with the judges who presided over the outcomes. Under Jenkins’ leadership, he and six members of his squad of Baltimore police officers operated as a criminal enterprise raking in tens of thousands of dollars from the monster dealers they targeted.

TRACKING A MONSTER

While the city was transfixed that summer by every turn in the trials of the officers charged in the death of Freddie Gray, the plainclothes units continued to operate under the radar. When Jenkins took over the task force, he joined the plan to stalk Ronald Hamilton—who they believed was dealing

drugs—who seemed to fit Jenkins’ definition of a monster. Years before, the Maryland State Police had called Hamilton the person “who controlled most of the drug trafficking in west and southwest Baltimore City and County.”

Hamilton purchased a 4,100-square-foot home with a pool in the exurb of Carroll County. When questioned later about his income, Hamilton would say he was buying and selling used cars, and gambling. He vehemently denied being involved in drug dealing. One night, Detective Jemell Rayam would say later, Jenkins and the crew were following Hamilton around the city and beyond.

Jenkins, in another car, relayed to his officers that he saw Hamilton get out of his vehicle carrying a large shopping bag. “And he was like, ‘Man, I know it was money in there or something big in there ... I felt like just hitting him and taking the bag,’” Rayam said. In that moment, Rayam — who’d been robbing people for years — realized that his new sergeant had similar goals. The long-range work they were supposed to do for their jobs, tracking dealers, was the same thing that enabled Jenkins and the squad to pull off their crimes.



Bail bondsman Donald Stepp testified that Sgt. Wayne Jenkins made drug drop-offs almost every day to Stepp's waterfront home in Middle River. Stepp said Jenkins sometimes left the drugs in a shed on his property. Baltimore, Maryland, 2019. Image by Kevin Richardson.

They searched [the Hamiltons home] for hours and found a heat-sealed bag containing \$50,000. In a closet, they found \$20,000 more. No drugs or guns were located. Jenkins tried to get Hamilton to cooperate with other investigations, suggesting he might even provide Hamilton with drugs to keep the information flowing. “You take care of us, we’ll take care of you,” Jenkins said, Hamilton would later testify. “You might even wake up one day with 10 kilos in your backyard.” Hamilton declined. The gun task force officers pocketed the \$20,000. To cover their tracks, they called Maryland State Police to the home to document seizing the other \$50,000. Although nothing illegal had been found and Hamilton was not charged with any crime, under civil asset forfeiture laws his money could be seized if he couldn’t account for how it was earned.

WITHOUT A WARRANT

It’s not clear when Jenkins, who joined the police department in 2003, began stealing. In his plea agreement, the earliest admitted robbery was in 2011, after a high-speed chase and a crash. The victim in that case, like many contacted by The Sun for this report, declined to speak about the

circumstances. Some cited a desire to move on with their lives, while others said they feared retribution. Videos, interviews and testimony suggest a pattern that began earlier for Jenkins, including entering homes without a warrant. He and other officers would say they were merely seeing whether the keys worked, which is allowed to confirm someone's link to a property. But according to some defense attorneys, officers would go on to enter the house and secretly search. If they found something worthwhile, they might return with a warrant. Ivan Bates, a defense attorney, had flagged the issue at a client's trial in 2014.

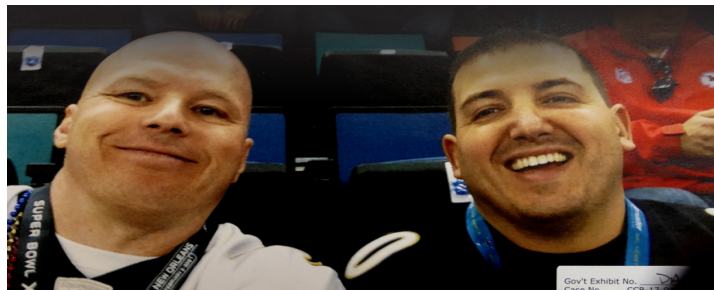
"What police are telling you, which is mind boggling, is we're going to take a person's keys, and we're just going to go to their house, and we're going to go ahead and put them in the door, and if it opens, it opens," Bates told the judge. "That's mind boggling because as citizens we have rights, and it's obvious the police don't believe these rights apply to these citizens."

One of the clearest examples Bates came across was back in 2010. Jenkins was an officer in a different plainclothes unit then, and he and a sergeant spotted a man named Jamal Walker sitting in his car in East Baltimore. They asked Walker to get out of the vehicle. They said they smelled marijuana. Walker said he didn't smoke and didn't have any marijuana. Jenkins "asked if I had guns, drugs or large amounts of money," Walker recalled in an interview. He said he replied he had \$40,000 in cash destined for the bank. The sergeant, Keith Gladstone — whom Jenkins has described as a mentor — dangled a bag of marijuana that Walker says did not belong to him. "Now we get to keep your money," Gladstone told him, according to Walker. He alleges that the cops pocketed \$20,000 of his money. Walker's wife, Jovonne, said the officers came to their home that night and entered without a warrant. Terrified to discover strange men entering her home, she triggered the alarm system, which summoned uniformed patrol officers to the scene.

In September 2015, a woman remembers being home when she heard someone quietly come in the front door of her Southwest Baltimore apartment. Andrea Crawford assumed it was her husband [but] it turned out Jenkins and his officers had arrested her husband. Crawford began to object, but Jenkins told her she could either let him search without a warrant or he could go get one [and her landlord and child protective services would be notified.] "I knew I had nothing, so I let them search," Crawford said in an interview. "I didn't want the trouble."

DOPE DROP-OFFS

According to Donald Stepp, a bail bondsman who was his drug-dealing partner, the partnership with Jenkins began in late 2012 when the pair were traveling to Delaware Park Casino. Jenkins, a recently minted sergeant, started talking about how he often seized large amounts of drugs. As the conversation wore on, he asked whether Stepp would begin selling products for him.



Months after they entered into an agreement to sell drugs, Jenkins and bail bondsman Donald Stepp went to New Orleans to see the Baltimore Ravens play in Super Bowl XLVII in 2013. New Orleans, Louisiana. February, 2013. Image by U.S. Attorney's Office.

Stepp had done prison time — once addicted to cocaine and alcohol, he amassed a lengthy criminal rap sheet by breaking into vehicles and businesses to steal things to support his addiction. He emerged from prison clean and sober, and got a job in the mortgage industry. When the housing market crashed, new regulations prevented someone with Stepp's record from participating. He turned back to drug dealing, eventually connecting with Colombian and Dominican suppliers, he said. For his day job, he decided to become a bail bondsman.

Late at night, Jenkins would deposit the drugs in a shed outside Stepp's home or ask him to open the garage. Stepp had a client base for cocaine, but Jenkins was dropping off a wide array of narcotics — more than Stepp could handle. "It was just over the top. Everything and anything that could be imagined," Stepp later testified. "It was coming in such an abundance that I didn't even know what it was." The night of the riots in April 2015, Jenkins showed up with two garbage bags full of pharmaceutical drugs. He told Stepp he had grabbed people running out of looted pharmacies. "'I've got an entire pharmacy,'" Jenkins said, according to Stepp.

CAUGHT

Within weeks of returning from leave, Jenkins and six other members of Baltimore's Gun Trace Task Force were in handcuffs. The reckoning wasn't the result of a citizen complaint or a tip from a concerned cop. It began when a member of the squad was talking on the phone with a drug-slinging childhood friend. He was picked up on a wiretap investigation of a drug crew by police in Harford and Baltimore counties. Those wiretap recordings, and the subsequent criminal charges that caused officers to flip and tell all, finally allowed the police department's dark underbelly to be exposed.

On Feb. 23, 2017, a federal grand jury indicted the seven men, but it was kept quiet for a few days. On March 1, they were lured by ruse to the Internal Affairs office in East Baltimore — where Commissioner Kevin Davis met them. He wanted to look each officer in the eyes and convey the disgrace they'd brought to the badge.



On March 1, 2017, Jenkins and his officers were summoned under a ruse to the internal affairs offices and arrested on federal charges. Baltimore, Maryland. March, 2017. Image by Baltimore Police Department.

Davis recalled that most of the officers dropped their heads or looked away when they saw him. But Jenkins stared back defiantly. “He didn’t look away, he didn’t blink, he didn’t show any signs of remorse or regret or embarrassment — all the things everyone else did,” Davis recalled. “I have to believe he knew this fate was eventually going to meet him. I guess he was at peace with it.” It was under Davis and his command that Jenkins had been put at the helm of the elite unit, which they had charged with taking on the rampant violence roiling the city since 2015.

Why hadn’t Jenkins and his unit been found out earlier? A mix of reasons likely played a role. [It included] victims who weren’t willing to come forward or weren’t believed. A police department at best focused on near-term results, at worst enabling certain units that “got the job done.” Prosecutors and judges who gave great deference to the word of a police officer, particularly in the he-said, she-said scenarios inherent in the work. In 2011, an attorney in one of the civil suits against Jenkins told a jury that a message needed to be sent to cops like him. “Let these officers know that [just] because we give them a gun and a badge doesn’t mean they can disobey the law,” Richard Woods had argued.

He had run his two plainclothes squads “like a criminal gang,” a prosecutor said. “They were, simply put, both cops and robbers at the same time.” Jenkins wept. He said only that he had made “so many mistakes” and was remorseful. His mother told the court in a letter, “I promise you, he is not a ‘monster.’” Judge Catherine C. Blake sentenced Jenkins to 25 years in prison, a few years less than the maximum. Jenkins was a Baltimore police officer from 2003 to 2017. Had he been groomed over time by a broken police department that tolerated corruption?

His misconduct spanned the administrations of four police commissioners. The Sun asked them and their deputies how they could explain what took place on their watch. Those who responded — some key figures did not — said they hadn’t been told about Jenkins. They said they acted firmly against misconduct when such information was brought to them. They said they otherwise relied on commanders beneath them to respond to complaints and impose discipline. And they cautioned that any system of justice must act on evidence, not rumors.

“You get exposed to individual puzzle pieces, and eventually the whole thing comes together and people say, ‘How did you not recognize that was a picture of dogs playing poker?’” said former Commissioner Frederick H. Bealefeld III, who led the department from 2007 to 2012 and was a deputy before then. “It’s just not that clear,” Bealefeld said. Many people who worked with Jenkins say they have wrestled with the question of how they failed to see. “Wayne didn’t do what he did because ‘everybody knew,’” said defense attorney Jeremy Eldridge, who as a former city prosecutor recalls questioning Jenkins about one of his cases. “The reality of the situation was, he did an amazing job of toeing the line.”

But Eldridge thinks he and others should have known. “As much as we want to blame Wayne for what he did, prosecutors are guilty of not figuring it out, the cops around him are guilty for not figuring it out, and the supervisors,” he said.

“No one’s hands are clean.”