

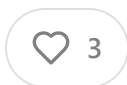
"She just knocked herself out": A tale of alleged police brutality in Berkshire County

Two cops accused of false reports by DA's office. One had previously resigned from a different department.



ANDREW QUEMERE

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Former Sheffield police officer Jacob Gonska examines a woman after she is knocked unconscious in police custody.

"What do you mean she's knocked out?" Jason LaForest recalled asking.

It was August 2020. LaForest, the police chief of the tiny Berkshire County town of Egremont, was speaking with one of his officers and another officer from the neighboring town of Sheffield. The two officers said that a handcuffed woman had been “resistant” and “hit her head when she was getting put into” a police cruiser, LaForest told The Mass Dump in an October interview.

But when LaForest watched video from the camera in the back of the vehicle, he was “alarmed,” he said.

Woman knocked out in Massachusetts police custody



“You threw me in the car,” the woman told the officers shortly after she regained consciousness. “You knocked me out.”

LaForest reported the incident to the Massachusetts State Police, who worked with the Berkshire County District Attorney’s Office to conduct a criminal investigation. In a 2021 interview with investigators, LaForest said the video appeared to show the woman being “launched into the back of the car.” Separately, he told Sheffield Police Chief Eric Munson that Sheffield officer Jacob Gonska might have used excessive force, according to a report by Munson.

LaForest told investigators that he believed Egremont officer Matthew O'Sullivan's explanation for the woman's injury was "not true." LaForest refused to sign O'Sullivan's use-of-force report, telling investigators that he did not want to "put [his] name on it."

However, neither officer ever faced discipline for the incident, and Berkshire County District Attorney's Office spokesman Andrew McKeever confirmed that prosecutors have not brought criminal charges against either of them. And despite LaForest's concerns about O'Sullivan's truthfulness, the officer still works for Egremont.

It wasn't the first time O'Sullivan had been accused of misconduct, either. Two years before Egremont hired him, he had resigned from the Shirley Police Department after an investigation found cause to fire him for kicking a man in the groin.

Last month, WBUR **reported** that it found more than a dozen Massachusetts police officers who resigned or were fired for misconduct, only to then get police jobs with different departments. The incidents included alleged sexual assault and drunk driving. O'Sullivan was not one of the officers WBUR identified.

The reports from The Mass Dump and WBUR come as the newly created Peace Officer Standards and Training Commission works to certify the state's police officers for the first time. That work includes identifying officers accused of misconduct and, if necessary, decertifying them to prohibit them from continuing to work as cops.

O'Sullivan declined an interview request, saying: "I am not a media relations officer for EPD and therefore would not feel comfortable speaking with you without a written directive from the chief of police."

LaForest gave O'Sullivan permission to speak, but the officer still declined.

Terence Coles, a lawyer who represented Gonska during the investigation, did not respond to requests to make the former officer available for an interview.

Munson said that Gonska voluntarily left the Sheffield Police Department "for a different job not in municipal law enforcement" and that he was "not sure where he is" now.

The Mass Dump first learned of the incident in March after receiving a copy of the Berkshire County district attorney's **Brady list**, which names both Gonska and O'Sullivan.

Brady lists are a tool that some prosecutors use to protect the due-process rights of people charged with crimes. These documents aid prosecutors in notifying defendants about allegations of dishonesty or other misconduct that can be used to challenge the officers' credibility in court.

In November 2021, the district attorney's office began providing Brady disclosures about both officers to defense attorneys. The **disclosure letters** say that "it was determined that portions of [the officer]'s report are not consistent with dash camera video."

However, neither officer appears on a section of the Brady list for officers who "should not be called as a witness without prior approval."

Berkshire County District Attorney Andrea Harrington said last year that this "do-not-call list" is for "officers who have made misrepresentations about material facts during the course of a criminal investigation," **according to iBerkshires.com**.

Even though prosecutors are obligated to disclose material that can help a person's defense, not all district attorneys in the state maintain Brady lists and **there is no law requiring the creation of a statewide list**.

Harrington **adopted a policy** of maintaining a Brady list in July 2020, a year and a half after she took office.

The newly elected Timothy Shugrue will take Harrington's place as district attorney in January. A former prosecutor who ran on a **platform** of "prosecuting criminals to the fullest extent," Shugrue did not respond to requests for comment.

"She Ain't Going Anywhere Now"

On the night of August 25, 2020, Egremont and Sheffield police were dealing with an alleged domestic violence incident in Egremont. Police arrested a woman after she

allegedly assaulted her boyfriend, who had gone to the hospital with what O'Sullivan's report describes as "serious injuries."

The Mass Dump is not publishing the woman's name because she also reported being the victim of domestic violence that night. Great Barrington police officers arrested another man she accused of assaulting her.

After police handcuffed the woman and placed her in O'Sullivan's cruiser, they alleged that she tried to climb out through the open window, kicked, hit, and grabbed O'Sullivan, then kicked out the window of the vehicle. They also alleged that when they moved the woman to Gonska's cruiser, she tried to headbutt him.

LaForest, who had assisted the officers earlier, said that by this time he had moved to a different location and did not witness what happened next. However, it was caught on camera.

"Now you just got yourself another charge," Gonska says off camera, referencing the alleged headbutt.

"I'll kill you all," screams the woman, who is also off camera.

The woman continues yelling for a few seconds. Then the vehicle's back driver-side door is opened, and Gonska can be seen stepping forward with his right leg and simultaneously swinging his right arm forward. A loud thump can be heard as the woman's head slams into part of the car.

O'Sullivan is not visible when the woman goes flying, but he can be seen still holding on to her immediately after.

O'Sullivan tells the woman to get up, but she does not move. Gonska can be seen lifting her limp body into the vehicle. O'Sullivan then says he will call for medical help.

"She just knocked herself out," Gonska responds. Later, he comments: "She ain't going anywhere now."

The woman wakes up about a minute and a half after falling unconscious.

"You going to knock me out again?" she asks a short time later.

The doctor who examined the woman found that she had head trauma and acute strain of her neck muscles, among other injuries, according to a State Police report.

Both officers wrote reports saying that the woman was responsible for hitting her head.

Gonska wrote that he was "not able to maintain control" of the woman and that she "dove into the back seat floor head first."

O'Sullivan wrote that she "dropped her body weight causing officers to loose [sic] control of her."

LaForest told investigators that he did not know if the officers spoke with each other while writing their reports.

Elizabeth Quigley, a lawyer representing the woman, did not respond to requests to make the woman available for an interview.

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"Data is Inconclusive"

The Berkshire County District Attorney's Office released the video and reports from Gonska and O'Sullivan in March. The office later released State Police reports that summarize witness interviews and other investigative efforts.

State Police investigators recorded their interviews, but the department refused to release the recordings in response to a public records request.

Investigators interviewed Gonska but did not write a report summarizing the conversation. Investigators did not interview O'Sullivan; the reports do not describe any efforts to reach him.

After watching the video, State Police detective Edward Culver wrote that the "data is inconclusive to ... implicate officers for improper use of force relative to maintaining custody and control of [the woman]."

The State Police reports do not describe any findings that the officers' reports were contradicted by the video.

In the video, the woman's sister can be heard saying that she is recording and that one of the officers tried to stop her. Investigators spoke with the sister but said she did not provide a copy of her video. The sister did not respond to an interview request.

David Procopio, the spokesman for the State Police, did not respond to emails asking about the outcome of the investigation.

McKeever said that the district attorney's Brady Review Team made the decision to issue Brady disclosures separately from the State Police investigation.

LaForest never put O'Sullivan on administrative leave or opened an internal investigation despite concluding that the officer had not been truthful in his report.

"The Brady list is in his file," LaForest said. "That's kind of where I left it because [the State Police] didn't really give me any findings."

LaForest said he did not feel comfortable investigating the incident himself since he was present that night, even though he did not witness what happened.

"I will say that obviously I had an issue with this incident," he said. "I've always verbally expressed that, even to officer O'Sullivan."

However, LaForest said that he did not think O'Sullivan had used excessive force.

"I believe there's excessive force — one-hundred percent," he said. "I don't actually believe that officer O'Sullivan was the one that used excessive force. ... Do I believe

officer O'Sullivan was there and may have seen something? Yes."

"I Am Unable to Determine That Force Was Used at All"

About a week after the incident, before LaForest had contacted the State Police, Munson issued a one-page report that cleared Gonska of wrongdoing.

Munson's report describes the woman as "combative."

In the video, he wrote, "you see a body fall toward the open door and appear to strike the bottom of the door frame or the side of the seat with her head and then collapsing."

His description makes no mention of Gonska's movements or the woman's comments to the officers that they threw her and were responsible for knocking her out.

"I do not see any use of excessive force," Munson concluded. "[T]he officers were unable to control [the woman] who lost balance and struck her head."

Munson declined an interview request, saying that the town administrator would "not allow [him] to participate."

The town administrator, Rhonda LaBombard, declined an interview request and would not explain why she wouldn't give Munson permission to speak.

In September 2021, while the State Police investigation was underway, Munson asked Pittsfield Police Chief Michael Wynn to review the incident. Wynn agreed to conduct what he called an "informal use of force review."

Wynn later wrote a three-and-a-half-page report that cleared Gonska of wrongdoing.

According to Wynn's description of the video: "The cruiser door is opened and the defendant can be seen pitching or falling headfirst into the transport area with her head directed at the cruiser's floorboards."

Wynn said that the only question he needed to consider was whether the officers used force in a way that was "punitive."

"I can find no evidence in the record that this was the case," he wrote. "I am unable to determine that force was used at all during this portion of the encounter."

Like Munson's report, Wynn's report makes no mention of Gonska's movements or the woman's comments.

Wynn's administrative assistant, Brittany Walsh, declined to make Wynn available for an interview because "this case did not involve the Pittsfield Police Department."

Other than the August 2020 incident, there were no internal investigations of Gonska's conduct, according to Munson. The Great Barrington, Massachusetts, and Naugatuck, Connecticut, police departments, where Gonska previously worked, also said they had no records of internal investigations.

"Had Never Caught Him in a Lie"

LaForest, according to the summary of his State Police interview, said there were "a few circumstances where he questioned Officer O'Sullivan's integrity, but he had never caught him in a lie."

Before winding up on the Brady list, O'Sullivan was the subject of at least five internal affairs investigations, according to police records.

In 2019, the year Egremont hired O'Sullivan, three people lodged complaints against him.

In **one complaint**, a woman said that O'Sullivan had used excessive force while arresting her son, Kenneth Lockridge, for alleged disorderly conduct during a traffic stop for speeding.

According to his report, LaForest was not able to speak with Lockridge, but he did speak with Michael Nourse, a Sheffield police officer who helped with the arrest.

Nourse reportedly said that when O'Sullivan ordered Lockridge to put his hands behind his back, the man asked why he was being handcuffed, then O'Sullivan told Lockridge to stop resisting and kned him in the thigh about three times. Nourse said he did not witness Lockridge resist in any way, according to the report.

O'Sullivan, in his report, wrote that Lockridge resisted by pulling his hands away and "tensing his muscles." Egremont officer Maximilian Kolb backed up O'Sullivan's account in a separate report.

LaForest cleared O'Sullivan of wrongdoing, finding that the officer had used a "distraction technique" that was within policy.

The **other two complaints** accused O'Sullivan of attempting to inappropriately search a vehicle's glove compartment and racial profiling. LaForest cleared O'Sullivan in both cases, but in the second, the chief "discussed approaching people with tact and respect along with being open minded and empathetic," according to police records.

Last year, a Black man from Connecticut named Kipp Wiggins filed a **handwritten pro se lawsuit** that accuses O'Sullivan of racially profiling him in Egremont. Wiggins declined an interview request.

Prior to joining the Egremont Police Department, O'Sullivan worked as a reserve officer for Littleton and Shirley in Middlesex County.

In 2015, former Littleton select board member Jenna Brownson **made a complaint** about O'Sullivan that was later **reported in the Lowell Sun**.

When a work crew was trimming tree limbs near Brownson's home, she complained to the workers that they were cutting trees too far in on her property. O'Sullivan, who was directing traffic for the crew, approached and ordered Brownson to return to her car, according to police records.

Brownson alleged that O'Sullivan placed his hand on his gun and she believed he intended to threaten her. Workers reportedly said that O'Sullivan was standing normally. The department cleared the officer of wrongdoing.

On March 31, 2017, while working in Shirley, O'Sullivan arrested a man on drunk driving charges. O'Sullivan brought the man to the police station, where he was uncooperative, **according to police reports**.

Reserve officer Ian Brown wrote in his report that he and O'Sullivan escorted the man to a holding cell. The man resisted by bracing his left hand against the cell door's threshold, and the officers tried to push him inside, the report alleges.

O'Sullivan wrote that the man struck him in the face. O'Sullivan said he kned the man in the thigh two or three times, and the officers were then able to get him in the cell.

According to Brown's report:

After reviewing the booking video, once [redacted] was in the cell, he turned around with his hands down by his side and faced Officer O'Sullivan who was in the cell doorway. At this point, I observed Officer O'Sullivan execute a front kick striking [redacted] in the groin area and then stand in the doorway in a fighting stance again exchanging multiple words with [redacted]. After reviewing the booking video, either [redacted] or Officer O'Sullivan said "COME ON MOTHERFUCKER". It was at this time, that I pushed Officer O'Sullivan out of the doorway and yelled at [redacted] to sit down on the bed, and then I closed the door to cell five.

O'Sullivan wrote that he kicked the man in the groin because the man was coming at him. The officer said he feared for his safety.

Shirley has refused to release the video of the incident to The Mass Dump despite **two findings** by the Secretary of the Commonwealth's Office that the town has not provided a lawful basis for withholding it. The town has not yet responded to the most recent decision.

Peter Violette, a Shirley police sergeant, investigated the incident and determined that O'Sullivan had violated the department's policy against conduct unbecoming of an officer.

"For Reserve Officer O'Sullivan to kick the subject in the groin with his police boot while in the holding cell did not fall under the umbrella of using this type of defensive tactic," Violette explained in his report. "The subject was active resistant and assaultive while being escorted in the hallway to the holding cell, but was not active aggressive/assaultive towards either officers [sic] when in the holding cell."

In a letter to the Shirley Select Board on April 21, 2017, Shirley Police Chief Samuel Santiago wrote that O'Sullivan's "actions were not justified and ... placed the Town of Shirley in vicarious liability and possible lawsuit for violation of department policy, state law and violation of an individual's civil rights."

Santiago concluded that there was cause to terminate O'Sullivan.

O'Sullivan quit five days later.

Asked if the Middlesex County District Attorney's Office was aware of the Shirley incident, spokeswoman Meghan Kelly noted that the office's **Brady list** does not include O'Sullivan.

"We are looking at this to see if there is an impact on Middlesex cases," she added.

"That's An Interesting Question"

Two years after O'Sullivan resigned from the Shirley Police Department, Egremont hired him, according to a **Facebook post** by then-Egremont Police Chief Erik Josephson.

"I have no record of the Egremont Police Department reaching out to [the Shirley Police Department] for any background or to review personnel files," Santiago said.

Mary Brazie, an Egremont select board member, said during an October interview that the board has the authority to hire and fire employees. She said she did not know why O'Sullivan left Shirley and does not remember receiving a copy of the internal affairs records when he was hired.

"I was aware that there were some issues in that department," she said. "I don't believe I was aware of the exact issues."

Brazie said she didn't know if the town had a policy of requesting internal affairs records from previous employers when screening applicants for police jobs.

Asked why the town hired an officer who resigned after an investigation found cause to fire him, Brazie responded: "That's an interesting question."

Brazie also said she did not know the details of the August 2020 incident.

"I am aware that [O'Sullivan] is on the Brady list," she said. "I am not aware as to why."

Brazie said she did not look into why O'Sullivan was placed on the list when she first heard about it.

She explained: "We have a personnel director and the chief of police, and it is not my job to micromanage either one of them. If they felt that there was need for concern, I'm sure they would have spoken directly to the board about that."

Egremont has five police officers including the chief, [according to the town's website](#).

Asked if it was a problem for the town that one of its few officers is on the Brady list, Brazie said: "I would need more details before I was to make a personal decision on that."

Reached by phone again the next day, Brazie said that neither she nor the two other members of the select board would answer additional questions, citing the advice of legal counsel.

"An Officer Who Knowingly Makes an Untruthful Statement"

In 2020, after nationwide protests ignited by the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, the state Legislature [passed a police reform law](#) that established the POST Commission and requires that all officers receive certification from the agency.

The commission can deny certification to officers who don't complete the application process or meet the commission's standards. The agency can also decertify officers for misconduct, a process that would bar those individuals from working as police officers in Massachusetts.

The POST Commission said that it has denied recertification to 251 officers so far, [according to GBH](#). That includes 133 officers who did not complete all requirements

while on leave and will be allowed to finish the process within 90 days of returning to work.

The commission has not yet decertified any officers, according to GBH.

Officers whose last names start with A through H — like Gonska — were required to seek recertification earlier this year. The POST Commission **published a list** of recertified and newly certified officers last week. Gonska's name is not on the list. It's unclear whether he sought recertification.

Asked whether O'Sullivan is currently certified, POST Commission communications director Cindy Campbell said that any officer whose last name starts with a letter between I and P would be certified by law until an initial automatic certification expires on June 30, 2023.

The remaining officers in the Q-through-Z group must obtain recertification the following year.

According to **regulations promulgated by the commission**, "An officer who knowingly makes an untruthful statement concerning a material fact or knowingly omits a material fact from a use of force report may be subject to decertification."

Campbell did not respond when asked if the commission was reviewing or investigating any cases of alleged misconduct by Gonska or O'Sullivan.

Asked whether the agency considers an officer's placement on a Brady list as part of the certification process, Campbell said, "The POST Commission gives consideration to all information brought to our attention, to the extent allowed by our governing statute and regulations."

Three officers on the Berkshire County Brady list — Pittsfield officers Jennifer Bruechmann and Robert Horne and Williamstown officer Craig Eichhammer, the latter of whom appears on the "do not call" portion of the document — were recertified by the commission.

The 2020 law also requires police departments to submit information about misconduct investigations to the POST Commission so that the agency can create a public database. The database will allow departments to easily determine if a potential hire has a history of complaints. But the commission has delayed publication of the database.

"We do not currently have a target date to make these records public," Campbell said.

UPDATE (12/29/2022): Police records first obtained by *The Berkshire Eagle* show that O'Sullivan was the subject of additional complaints. The *Eagle* also reported that O'Sullivan got a part-time job with the Sheffield Police Department after the August 2020 incident.

UPDATE (1/2/2023): Shirley released the video showing O'Sullivan kicking a man in the groin and raising his fists.

UPDATE (1/31/2023): I recorded an episode about this story with The Weed Out podcast. Listen [here](#):



UPDATE (4/5/2023): Police records obtained by *The Berkshire Eagle* show that O'Sullivan has not had a shift at the Egremont Police Department since January 31, 2023. The town refused to provide any information or records about why O'Sullivan is no longer on active duty, only saying that the matter is the subject of active litigation.

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You can email me at aquemere0@gmail.com or send me a direct message on [Twitter](#). I'm also on [Mastodon](#) now, so give me a follow.

I'm building my own database of news stories about alleged police misconduct in Massachusetts, which you can view [here](#). I'll be updating the database with new entries soon. Subscribe to this newsletter to read more.

I also recently appeared with fellow newsletter writer Bill Shaner on the Rigged podcast to talk about the federal Department of Justice investigation of the Worcester Police Department — [listen here](#)! Bill wrote a great piece about the investigation for Luke O'Neil's Hell World newsletter, which you can read [here](#) (scroll down about halfway).

That's all for now.



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