



**INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATIONS  
DIVISION**

Report Concerning the Police-Involved Death in  
Baltimore County on December 3, 2025

March 16, 2026

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## I. Introduction

On December 3, 2025, at approximately 8:30 p.m., officers with the Baltimore County Police Department (BCPD) responded to an apartment located on the 900 block of Holgate Drive after receiving a 911 call for a stabbing. Officers arrived and encountered a man, later identified as Howard Sye, holding a knife. Officers gave Mr. Sye verbal commands to drop the knife. Mr. Sye did not comply. One of the officers attempted to take the knife from Mr. Sye. In response, Mr. Sye maintained control of his knife in one hand and used his other hand to punch at the officer's head. At that point, multiple officers discharged their service weapons, striking Mr. Sye. Officers provided medical aid until emergency medical services (EMS) arrived on the scene and transported Mr. Sye to a local hospital, where he was later pronounced dead.

After completing its investigation and evaluating all the available evidence, the Office of the Attorney General has determined that the subject officers did not commit a crime under Maryland law. Accordingly, the Office of the Attorney General has declined to prosecute any of the subject officers in this case.

The IID's investigation focused exclusively on potential criminal culpability relating to the subject officers' conduct. By statute, the IID only has jurisdiction to investigate the actions of police officers, not those of any other individuals involved in the incident. Moreover, the IID's analysis does not consider issues of civil liability or the department's administrative review of the subject officers' conduct. Compelled statements by subject officers may be considered in civil or administrative proceedings but may not be used in criminal investigations or prosecutions due to the subject officers' Fifth Amendment rights. If any compelled statements exist in this case, the IID has not considered them in this investigation.

This report is composed of a factual narrative followed by a legal analysis. Every fact in the narrative is supported by the evidence obtained in this investigation, including forensic and autopsy reports, police radio transmissions, dispatch records, police reports, police body-worn camera footage, photographs, EMS reports, medical records, department policy, and interviews with civilian and law enforcement witnesses. The subject officers in this case did not make statements to the IID, which had no impact on the prosecutorial decision.

The legal analysis explains why the Office of the Attorney General will not bring charges under the relevant Maryland statutes.

This investigation involved one decedent and four subject officers:

- A. The decedent, Howard Sye, was 31 years old at the time of the incident. He was a Black male who lived in Essex, Maryland.
- B. Officer Nicholas Vagnier has been employed by BCPD since March 2023. He is a White male and, at the time of the incident, he was 25 years old.
- C. Officer Hunter Cortes has been employed by BCPD since September 2023. He is a Hispanic male and, at the time of the incident, he was 24 years old.

- D. Officer Trent LaPosta has been employed by BCPD since April 2024. He is a White male and, at the time of the incident, he was 24 years old.
- E. Officer Malia Hooper has been employed by BCPD since April 2024. She is a Black female and, at the time of the incident, she was 23 years old.

Any other officer identified by name in this report is a witness officer. Their names have been included only to clarify the facts presented.

The IID reviewed all available departmental disciplinary records and criminal histories of the involved parties and, where they existed, determined that none were relevant to the legal analysis.

## **II. Factual Summary**

On December 3, 2025, at approximately 8:30 p.m., a woman (identified herein as “Caller”) called 911 to report that her brother, Howard Sye, had gotten angry, and he had hurt her. While on the phone with the 911 dispatcher, Caller advised that Mr. Sye had stabbed her. Multiple BCPD officers responded to Caller’s location, an apartment building on the 900 block of Holgate Drive in Essex, Maryland. Officer Hooper and Officer Pronko<sup>3</sup> were first to arrive at the apartment building. A witness<sup>4</sup>, who was standing outside the apartment building when officers arrived, directed the officers to an apartment located on the lower level, directly to the right of the stairs.

Officer Pronko knocked on the apartment door, with Officer Hooper standing behind him at the base of the stairs. Officers LaPosta, Cortes, and Vagnier arrived in close succession and stood in a row on the stairs leading down to the apartment, with their department-issued firearms drawn. As the apartment door opened, all the officers pointed their firearms at Mr. Sye, who was standing in the doorway. Mr. Sye had a knife in his hand down at his side. The officers immediately ordered Mr. Sye to put his hands up and to put down the knife. Mr. Sye did not comply with the officers’ orders.

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<sup>3</sup> Although BCPD Officer Pronko is named within this report, he is not a subject of this investigation. The other BCPD officers on scene who did not have direct contact with Mr. Sye are identified in this report as “witness officer.”

<sup>4</sup> The witness is a member of the family of Caller and Mr. Sye. This person arrived at the apartment building prior to police and called 911 to report that Mr. Sye had stabbed Caller.



**Image 1:** A still image from Officer Pronko's body-worn camera, showing Mr. Sye in the doorway holding a knife (circled in green) in his hand.



**Image 2 (Left):** An on-scene photograph taken by a Maryland State Police Crime Scene technician of the blade of Mr. Sye's knife, found on the floor of the apartment building hallway.



**Image 3 (Right):** An on-scene photograph taken by a Maryland State Police Crime Scene technician of the handle of Mr. Sye's knife, found on the floor of the apartment building hallway.

As Mr. Sye stepped into the hallway, Officer Pronko grabbed Mr. Sye's hand that held the knife. The other officers continued to order Mr. Sye to put the knife down. In response to Officer Pronko grabbing his hand, Mr. Sye turned and swung his fist at Officer Pronko. In his attempt to punch Officer Pronko, Mr. Sye pushed Officer Pronko backwards toward the wall. Officers Hooper, LaPosta, Cortes, and Vagnier then discharged their firearms, striking Mr. Sye. The officers fired at Mr. Sye approximately nine seconds after he opened the apartment door.



**Image 2 (Left):** A still image from Officer LaPosta's body-worn camera, showing Officer Pronko grabbing Mr. Sye's hand.  
**Image 3 (Right):** A still image from Officer Cortes's body-worn camera, showing Mr. Sye punching Officer Pronko.

Mr. Sye fell to the ground. The officers quickly handcuffed Mr. Sye and began providing medical aid. Once EMS arrived, Mr. Sye was transported to the hospital where he was pronounced dead. A Maryland State Police Crime Scene Technician (CST) recovered Mr. Sye's knife, which had broken into two pieces, from the apartment hallway. A witness officer entered the apartment and located Caller, who had multiple stab wounds. EMS transported Caller to the hospital where she was treated for her injuries and later released. Officer Pronko sustained a small wound to his hand, for which he also received medical treatment.

### III. Supplemental Information

#### A. Autopsy

On December 4, 2025, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (the "OCME") performed an autopsy of Howard Sye. The Medical Examiner concluded that multiple gunshot wounds, seventeen in total, caused Mr. Sye's death and determined that the manner of his death was "Homicide."<sup>5</sup> There was no evidence of close-range discharge of a firearm on the skin surrounding any of the gunshot wounds. OCME toxicology testing detected the presence of alcohol in Mr. Sye's system.

#### B. Firearms Recovery and Ballistics Information

A CST from the Maryland State Police recovered each of the subject officers' Glock 17 9mm handguns. Officer Hooper's handgun had a magazine loaded with twelve 9mm Luger cartridges. Officer LaPosta's handgun had a magazine loaded with fifteen 9mm Luger cartridges. Officer Cortes's handgun had a magazine loaded with twelve 9mm Luger cartridges, and Officer Vagnier's handgun had a magazine loaded with sixteen 9mm Luger cartridges. The subject officers' Glock 17 magazines can hold up to seventeen cartridges.

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<sup>5</sup> Manner of death is a classification used to define whether a death is from intentional causes, unintentional causes, natural causes, or undetermined causes. The OCME uses five categories of manner of death: natural, accident, suicide, homicide, and undetermined. "Homicide" applies when death results from a volitional act committed by another person to cause fear, harm, or death. This term is not considered a legal determination; rather, it is largely used to assist in the collection of public health statistics. *A Guide for Manner of Death Classification*, First Edition, National Association of Medical Examiners, February 2002.

From the apartment building stairs and hallway, a CST located and recovered eleven 9mm Luger cartridge casings.

### C. Department Policy

The BCPD Field Manual provides officers with written policies and procedures in the use of force, including policies relevant to this investigation.

Field Manual Article 12-1.0 (Use of Force Incidents) defines deadly force as force that is “reasonably calculated to cause death or serious physical injury.” The manual states that an officer may use deadly force only in situations where deadly force is “necessary and proportional” to protect the officer or others from death or serious physical injury. However, prior to using force, an officer must communicate with involved individuals, including stating the officer’s identity, purpose, and intention. Further, officers should take steps, including verbal communication, to de-escalate and obtain compliance without using force. Moreover, prior to using force, including deadly force, officers should exhaust alternative ways to resolve the situation without force, unless alternatives are unreasonable given the totality of circumstances. Finally, officers are required to render medical aid to any individual injured due to police action and to request emergency medical assistance.

Field Manual Article 12-4.0 (Firearms) outlines limited circumstances in which officers may discharge their firearms, including in self-defense and in defense of others to prevent death or serious physical injury. Further, justification for using a firearm is determined only by facts known to the officer at the time of the firearm use.

## IV. Legal Analysis

After a criminal investigation, prosecutors must determine whether to bring criminal charges against a person to hold them accountable pursuant to Maryland law. When making that determination, prosecutors have a legal and ethical duty to only charge a person with a crime when they can meet the State’s burden of proof; that is, when the available evidence can prove each element of that crime beyond a reasonable doubt. Prosecutors must also determine whether the accused person could raise an affirmative defense. In those cases, prosecutors not only need to prove the crime, but they also must determine whether the evidence could disprove the defense beyond a reasonable doubt. Ultimately, the decision to bring any charges rests on whether the available evidence is sufficient for prosecutors to meet those standards.

Based on the evidence, three relevant offenses were considered in this case. The first offense is Maryland’s Use of Force Statute, which makes it a crime for officers to intentionally use excessive force.<sup>6</sup> The second and third offenses are homicide related charges for the intentional killing of a person.

There is insufficient evidence to prove that the subject officers committed the aforementioned crimes. Accordingly, the Office of the Attorney General will not pursue criminal charges against any of the subject officers. This report explains in further detail why, based on the

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<sup>6</sup> See Md. Code, Public Safety § 3-524(d)(1).

evidence, a prosecutor could not prove beyond a reasonable doubt that any officer committed a crime.

#### A. Maryland Use of Force Statute

Proving a violation of the Use of Force Statute requires a prosecutor to establish beyond a reasonable doubt that a subject officer:

- (1) used force that was not necessary and proportional to prevent an imminent threat of physical injury to themselves or another person, or to accomplish a legitimate law enforcement objective;
- (2) intended to use force that was excessive, *i.e.*, not necessary and proportional under the circumstances; and
- (3) the use of excessive force resulted in serious bodily injury or death.<sup>7</sup>

As it is undisputed that the subject officers fired their weapons and shot Mr. Sye, which resulted in his death, only the first two elements are at issue.

Determining whether an officer's use of force is "necessary and proportional" to prevent an imminent threat of physical injury to someone or to accomplish a legitimate law enforcement objective, is a fact-specific inquiry. Generally, a use of force is considered "necessary and proportional" when: 1) an officer had no reasonable alternative available under the circumstances; 2) the kind and degree of force was appropriate in light of the officer's legitimate law enforcement objective; and 3) given the context, the force used was not likely to result in harm that was too severe or disproportionate to the officer's law enforcement objective.<sup>8</sup> When a factfinder—either a judge or a jury—conducts this analysis, they must consider the totality of the circumstances, including, but not limited to, the nature of the call for service, what occurred in the moments before force was used, what the subject officers knew at the time force was used, and the time and distances involved.<sup>9</sup>

Based on the totality of the circumstances, there is insufficient evidence to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the subject officers used force beyond what was necessary and proportional to prevent Mr. Sye from posing a danger to themselves or to others.

With respect to whether the use of force was necessary, the subject officers arrived at the apartment building knowing that a man had stabbed his sister inside an apartment. When Mr. Sye opened the apartment door holding a knife, the subject officers had a legitimate law enforcement objective to disarm and detain him and to enter the apartment to locate Caller. Consistent with department policy, upon encountering Mr. Sye, the subject officers used clear verbal communication to de-escalate the situation and detain Mr. Sye without using force. Specifically, the officers gave Mr. Sye repeated commands to put his hands up and to drop the knife. Officer Pronko also attempted to take the knife from Mr. Sye using limited physical contact. However,

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<sup>7</sup> MPJI-Cr 4:36 (3d ed.2024).

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the "necessary and proportional" standard, see [this opinion](#) written by the Office of the Attorney General. 107 Op. Atty. Gen. Md. 33 (2022).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

Mr. Sye ignored the subject officers' commands and did not comply with Officer Pronko's attempt to disarm him. Instead, Mr. Sye further escalated the situation by punching Officer Pronko and pushing him into a corner. Mr. Sye's decision to attack Officer Pronko while holding a knife created an immediate threat to Officer Pronko's safety.

With respect to whether the kind and degree of force used by the subject officers was proportional to the imminent threat of harm presented by Mr. Sye, the evidence shows that Mr. Sye refused to comply with the officers' repeated commands to put down the knife. Nor did Mr. Sye let go of the knife when Officer Pronko attempted to disarm him. Instead, Mr. Sye punched Officer Pronko and pushed Officer Pronko into a corner where he could not retreat to safety. Mr. Sye's actions towards Officer Pronko created an imminent threat of serious harm or death to Officer Pronko. Given these circumstances, we cannot defeat a claim that the subject officers' use of force in response was necessary and proportional.

Against this backdrop, there is insufficient evidence to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the subject officers' use of force was not necessary and proportional to prevent an imminent threat of physical injury to themselves or another person. Accordingly, the Office of the Attorney General will not charge the subject officers with a violation of the Use of Force Statute in this case.

## B. Homicide Offenses

When a person is killed, there are four homicide charges that a prosecutor may consider in the State of Maryland:

- First Degree Murder: the willful, deliberate, and premeditated killing of another.<sup>10</sup>
- Second Degree Murder: when the defendant intended to kill or inflict such serious injury that death would be the likely result and there was no justification or mitigating circumstances.<sup>11</sup>
- Voluntary Manslaughter: an intentional killing that is not murder because the defendant acted in partial self-defense.<sup>12</sup>
- Involuntary Manslaughter: when the defendant acted with gross negligence and that conduct caused the death of another.<sup>13</sup>

First Degree Murder was not considered in this case because there is no evidence that the shooting of Mr. Sye was premeditated. Specifically, premeditation requires a prosecutor to prove that "the design to kill must have preceded the killing by an appreciable length of time, that is, time enough to be deliberate."<sup>14</sup> This inquiry requires a fact-specific evaluation, in which the factfinder should consider the totality of the circumstances, including whether an individual is defending themselves against deadly force.<sup>15</sup> In this case, because the evidence shows that the

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<sup>10</sup> MPJI-Cr. 4:17 (3d ed.2024).

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> MPJI-Cr 4:17.2 (3d ed.2024).

<sup>13</sup> MPJI-Cr. 4:17.8 (3d ed. 2024).

<sup>14</sup> *Tichnell v. State*, 287 Md. 695, 717 (1980).

<sup>15</sup> *See Purnell v. State*, 250 Md. App 703, 714-715 (2021).

shooting of Mr. Sye was intentional but not premeditated, Second Degree Murder and Voluntary Manslaughter are the appropriate homicide offenses that remain for consideration.

If the evidence indicates that there is legal justification or certain mitigating circumstances involved, such as the defense of others, then a prosecutor could not prove the remaining homicide offenses against the subject officers.<sup>16</sup> A police officer's use of deadly force is legally justified if it is in complete self-defense, in defense of others, or in furtherance of law enforcement related duties.<sup>17</sup>

Defense of others exists when: (1) the accused had the subjective belief that another person was in immediate or imminent danger of serious harm or death; (2) the accused's belief was objectively reasonable; (3) the force used was not more than what was reasonably necessary in light of the threat or actual force; and (4) the force used was for the purpose of aiding the person they were defending.<sup>18</sup> Defense of others is an affirmative defense, meaning that a prosecutor must prove beyond a reasonable doubt that one of the elements of the defense is not applicable.

When an officer has sufficient probable cause to believe that a person poses a "threat of serious physical harm," then the officer may use deadly force,<sup>19</sup> and the reasonableness of that decision must be viewed from "the perspective of a reasonable police officer similarly situated."<sup>20</sup> In practice, this means that a factfinder must consider that police officers often work under rapidly changing circumstances and that what constitutes a reasonable use of force may change from moment to moment.<sup>21</sup>

Here, when the subject officers encountered Mr. Sye, he was armed with a knife. Although the subject officers attempted to de-escalate the encounter, their efforts were unsuccessful. Mr. Sye did not comply with repeated commands to drop the knife. Mr. Sye did not let go of the knife when Officer Pronko attempted to take it from him. Rather, in response to Officer Pronko attempting to disarm him, Mr. Sye attacked Officer Pronko, punching him and pushing him into a corner. Because of the tight space in the hallway, Officer Pronko could not create distance between himself and Mr. Sye, nor could Officer Pronko retreat to safety. Further, Mr. Sye was still holding his knife when he punched and pushed Officer Pronko. Given these circumstances, and the fact that the subject officers knew Mr. Sye had recently stabbed a woman in the apartment, we cannot prove that it was unreasonable for the subject officers to believe that Officer Pronko was in imminent danger of serious harm when Mr. Sye punched and pushed him. Likewise, we cannot prove that it was unreasonable for the subject officers to use deadly force in response to the threat that Mr. Sye posed to Officer Pronko.

Based on the investigation, the actions of the subject officers do not constitute the crime of Second-Degree Murder or Voluntary Manslaughter. We cannot overcome any of the elements of defense of others. Further, because Involuntary Manslaughter only applies to negligent, but not

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<sup>16</sup> See *Malaska v. State*, 216 Md. App. 492, 517-522 (2014).

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*; MPJI-Cr 4:17.3 (3d ed. 2024).

<sup>18</sup> *Porter v. State*, 455 Md. 220, 234-36 (2017); MPJI-Cr 5:01.

<sup>19</sup> *Estate of Blair v. Austin*, 469 Md. 1, 24 (quoting *Tennessee v. Garner*, 471 U.S. 1, 11 (1985)).

<sup>20</sup> *State v. Albrecht*, 336 Md. 475, 501 (1994); *State v. Pagotto*, 361 Md. 528, 555-556 (2000) (quoting *Graham v. Conner*, 490 U.S. 386, 397 (1989)).

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

intentional, acts that cause a person's death, the offense is inapplicable to this case, and as such, this report does not analyze it. Accordingly, the Office of the Attorney General will not charge the subject officers with a homicide offense.

## **VI. Conclusion**

This report has presented factual findings, legal analysis, and conclusions relevant to the December 3, 2025, police-involved death of Howard Sye in Essex, Maryland. The Office of the Attorney General has declined to pursue charges in this case because, based on the evidence obtained in its investigation, the subject officers did not commit a crime.