

CRIME

'No heroes here': Exhaustive report lays out two decades of Baltimore Police and city failure that led to GTTF scandal

By Justin Fenton
Baltimore Sun • Jan 13, 2022 at 8:47 am



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Five years after the [Gun Trace Task Force corruption scandal](#) broke, a new report offers the first comprehensive account of how the Baltimore Police Department repeatedly failed to address misconduct complaints involving officers now serving federal prison time.

The [report](#), which spans more than 500 pages and cost taxpayers more than \$4.47 million, unearths dozens of previously unknown allegations of corruption and misconduct against officers implicated in the case and provides detailed summaries of the outcomes, showing the vast majority were discarded with little investigation.



“There are no heroes here,” said Michael Bromwich, the former Justice Department inspector general who led the investigation, in an interview.

The report includes details about a previously unknown, off-the-books Baltimore Police spying operation on an aide to former Mayor Martin O’Malley and a scene involving former Mayor Catherine Pugh crying on the floor of her office when she fired Commissioner Kevin Davis. It lays new corruption allegations on two retired sergeants, and raises questions about repeated supervisory lapses by a current colonel.

Investigators conducted interviews with 145 people, including with every mayor, police commissioner and top prosecutor from the past 20 years, as well as a range of police officers, city officials and consultants who worked with the city, and combed through emails and internal records. Their report reaches the assessment that corruption has been prevalent for decades, allowed by a culture of dysfunction in the Police Department and City Hall.

“Anatomy of the Gun Trace Task Force Scandal: Its Origins, Causes, and Consequences” was compiled by the law firm of Steptoe and Johnson, led by Bromwich, and has been in the works for more than two years. The Police Department commissioned it under pressure in 2019 after being chided for failing to conduct any type of broad internal review of the scandal.

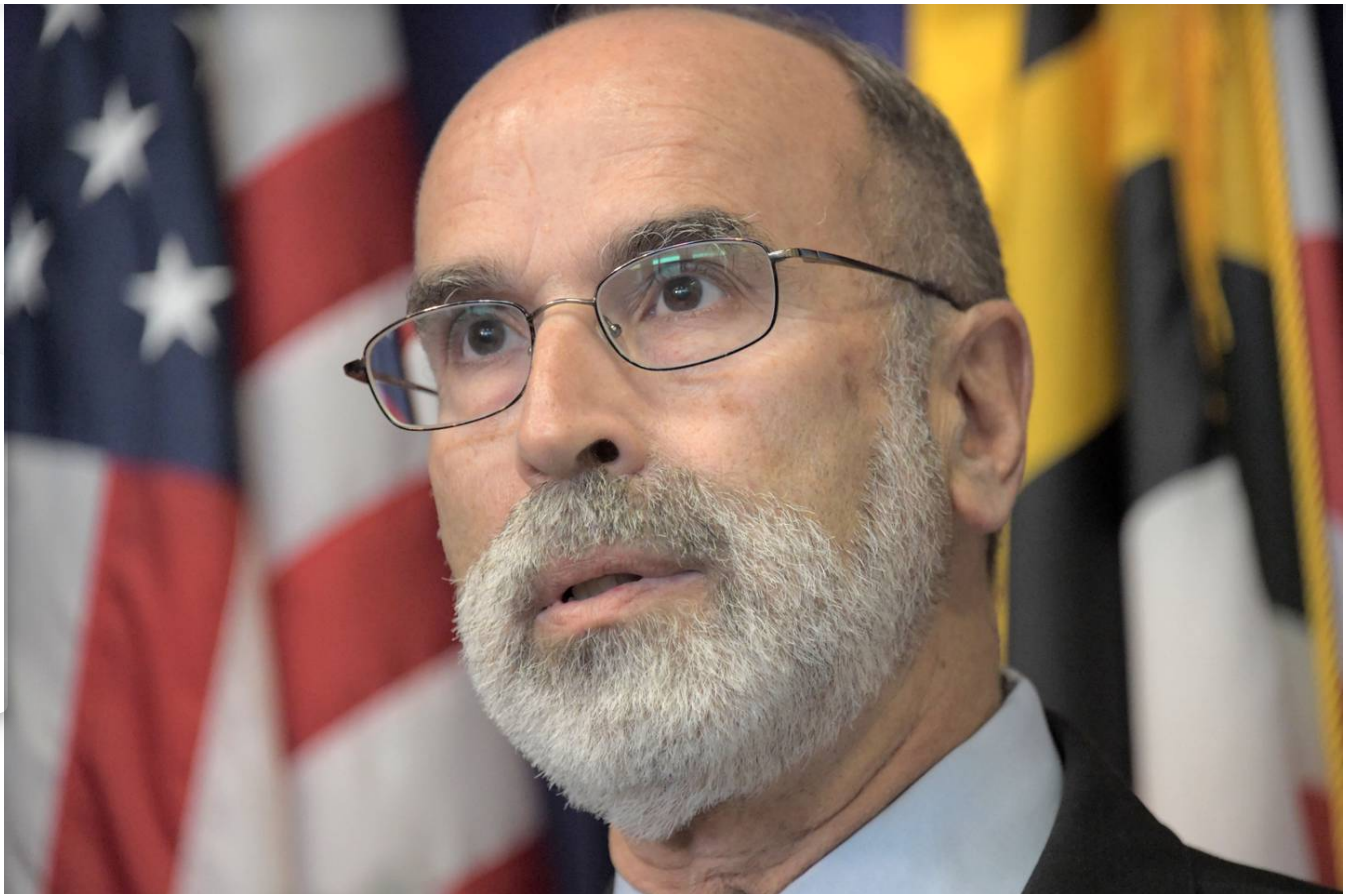
The FBI arrested seven members of the Gun Trace Task Force in March 2017. A [wiretap investigation](#) revealed that the plainclothes street enforcement unit, which had been prowling the city for guns and drawing accolades from its bosses, also was robbing people, lying in sworn paperwork, taking overtime for hours not worked, and stealing and selling drugs.

One of the report’s observations is that the department historically failed to look inward and analyze misconduct scandals involving its officers over the years.

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Michael R. Bromwich, hired to explore the origins of the Baltimore Police Gun Trace Task Force scandal, has concluded a two-year, multimillion dollar investigation with an exhaustive, scathing report. (Karl Merton Ferron/Baltimore Sun)

As federal investigators continued to probe the GTTF case, they charged more officers and uncovered crimes going back years.

“Corruption was a cancer that had taken root in pockets within BPD long before 2017 and had never been squarely addressed with the degree of focus and commitment of resources that were required,” the report found. “Corruption and misconduct were never accorded the priority they deserved by BPD leadership, and the core of a well-functioning accountability system — swift and certain consequences for misconduct — was never established.”

Bromwich said his team saw reasons for optimism with regard to the Police Department’s current path. He cited the consent decree reached by the city and the Justice Department to improve policing in Baltimore and the federal judge overseeing it, the proliferation of body cameras and camera audits (members of the GTTF were arrested as body cameras were in the early stages), and some of [Commissioner Michael Harrison’s initiatives](#).

“It’s not an uplifting story, but some uplifting things are happening now,” Bromwich said.


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who ran from them in order to teach them a lesson.

In 1997, during the execution of a residential search and seizure warrant, Rivera and a senior officer found cash, according to Rivera's account. They exchanged a glance and a shrug. The supervisor, identified as William Knoerlein, allegedly took the money and shared a couple hundred dollars with Rivera after they left the scene, a practice that Rivera said continued for years.

 "I've got dirt on you, you've got dirt on me," Knoerlein allegedly told Rivera, who was sentenced to 14 months in federal prison last year for lying about stealing cocaine in 2009.

   Knoerlein, a sergeant who retired in 2019 while suspended, declined to comment on the report's allegations. He spent his last six years with the department assigned to the ATF.

 Over the years, the convicted Gun Trace Task Force officers were the subject of numerous internal affairs complaints, but details have emerged only through civil cases and leaked documents.

For example, The Baltimore Sun [previously reported, citing leaked documents](#), that convicted detective Jemell Rayam was accused of stealing money and failed a polygraph test in 2009 — well before being promoted to the task force.

But the report gives the first explanation as to why he evaded punishment, using hearing transcripts and interviews to show that an internal disciplinary panel threw out the case because the department had brought the case beyond the statute of limitations.

"Even though the facts strongly supported Rayam's guilt, there was no notification of his supervisors, and nothing was done to ensure that he was never put in a position where he was required to testify in court," the report said.

The report also shines new light on those already in prison.

Convicted detective Daniel Hersl was the subject of nine internal affairs complaints and two "use of force" reviews, triggering supervisor review in 2015 — one year before he hit the streets with the Gun Trace Task Force. Some of the cases led to lawsuits that garnered media attention, but Sean Miller, the police colonel overseeing him at the time who remains on the force as a lieutenant, told the Bromwich team that he "was never aware that Hersl had multiple complaints against him." Yet Miller and other supervisors took part in meetings and traded

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Such files have been kept secret for decades, and are now considered public documents under police reforms passed last year by the General Assembly.

“These records were concealed from the public, they were spared the embarrassment of having to explain how somebody like Hersl could remain on the force,” Bromwich said.

The Police Department’s current chief of patrol, Col. Kevin A. Jones, is among the supervisors scrutinized in the report. He was an early supervisor of the Gun Trace Task Force, and the report says that under his leadership regional partners pulled out of the effort as the unit became focused on “rips,” a term for aggressive street enforcement.

“We do not want the group to turn into a rip squad,” a commander wrote to Jones in November 2009.

Asked by investigators about what precipitated the email, Jones said officers in the unit had “cried to daddy.”

Jones also recruited convicted officers Momodu Gondo and Rayam into the task force and said he never saw anything to question their ethics.

The investigators, however, questioned why he recruited them in the first place: “We found no evidence that either Rayam or Gondo had shown any inclination or aptitude for the type of analytic and investigative work that defined the core of the GTTF’s original mission.”

Jones himself is accused by a Baltimore County officer interviewed in the report of conducting a search without a warrant.

Jones remained in a supervisory role over the Gun Trace Task Force and other plainclothes units and took part in meetings about disciplinary problems, the report’s authors found. Since the scandal broke, Jones has been promoted.

Police Commissioner Michael Harrison reiterated Thursday that he had full confidence in Jones, saying he went through a competitive vetting process and has performed well in his position.

The report contains no allegations that higher-ranking commanders deliberately encouraged corruption, but that they were encouraged by the officers’ productivity.

The report’s authors conclude that corrupt officers were “largely self-selecting, identifying

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could not be trusted to participate and keep their secrets.

“The reverse was also true: honest officers knew to stay away from their colleagues who they knew or suspected operated ‘in the gray area.’ For various reasons, those honest officers kept their suspicions to themselves, or shared them only with other like-minded officers without reporting their suspicions to their supervisors or to [internal affairs].”



The investigators say that the Baltimore Police Department needs to find ways to get talented officers to work in internal affairs, and that the organization needs to teach its own history in detail to recruits, including firsthand accounts from corrupt officers and their victims.

While the city’s mayors have changed police commissioners with the frequency of a volatile sports franchise owner, officers knew that despite the high-level proclamations of change, things stayed largely the same.

The report begins with the O’Malley’s term, tracing his attempts to reduce crime and combat misconduct. O’Malley imported two commissioners from New York City, and the report describes the tenure of Commissioner Kevin Clark as disastrous, rife with turmoil and the implementation of harmful policies.



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In one particularly startling anecdote, the investigators compiled a previously unknown account of the Police Department’s internal affairs conducting “off the books” spying on a top O’Malley aide as the mayor neared firing Clark. Officers followed Kristen Mahoney around town and were instructed to follow her into restaurants and find reasons to pull her over while driving. Clark denied knowledge of the operation, but multiple officers who were involved in it confirmed their participation to the investigators.

Mahoney, who is now acting director of the U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance, was not previously aware of the surveillance.

“Well, it’s upsetting,” Mahoney told The Sun, “but that was a long time ago.”

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The investigators said they were told of meddling by city leaders, and of police sharing sensitive information with elected leaders in hopes of getting help with promotions or intervention in disciplinary matters. The reports calls “counterproductive and corrosive.”

Disgraced Sgt. Wayne Jenkins, the Gun Trace Task Force ringleader who is serving 25 years in prison, gave one interview to the investigators in which he also alleged that Knoerlein and another one of his early supervisors, Michael Fries, were “dirty cops.” He said Fries

 encouraged him to steal \$10,000, which Jenkins said he gave to Fries to spend during a bachelor party in Atlantic City. Fries declined to comment to The Sun.



 Neither Knoerlein nor Fries were charged by federal authorities. Reached by investigators for comment, Fries said that he was tired of defending himself.



“I just can’t do it anymore and want to move on,” he said, according to the report.

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Scott Hall, Maryland-born ‘Bad Guy’ leader of wrestling’s New World Order, dies at 63

Scott Hall, professional wrestling’s “Bad Guy” who revolutionized the industry as a founding member of the New World Order faction, has died. He was 63.

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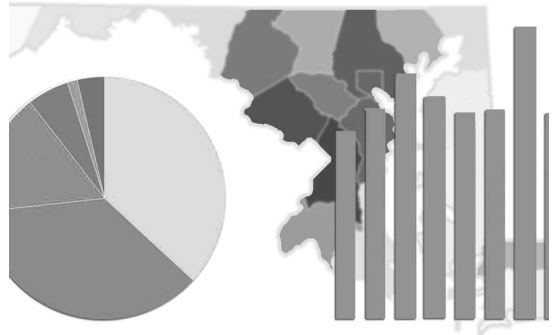
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