

# **Sonya Massey killed by Illinois police deputy sparks new wave of ‘Stop the killings’ protests across the country**

Sunday 4 August 2024, by [MIAH Malik](#) (Date first published: 2 August 2024).

**Once again, the police show their true colors: shooting in the face and killing a 36-year-old Black mother, Sonya Massey, in her own home in Springfield, Illinois. She called 911 for fear of an intruder and became the victim. She leaves two teenage children.**

It happened on July 6, but the reason and savage nature of the killing was not revealed immediately. Typically, an internal police review occurs first, and the police officer is put on paid leave. Not this time.

A police video-cam (released to the family 11 days later) from the other deputy on the scene showed when the two cops entered Massey’s home. Sean Grayson, 30-years-old, fires the shots that hit Massey in the face.

The police union, as expected, filed a grievance protesting Grayson’s termination.

## **The Timeline**

The news media from *USA Today*, CNN, *The New York Times* and Illinois papers including *The State Journal-Register*, gave a clear timeline of what happened hour-by-hour on July 6 and afterwards:

Around 12:50 a.m., two Sangamon County Sheriff’s deputies, including Sean Grayson, were called to a home in the 2800 block of Hoover Avenue in an unincorporated part of Woodside Township for a possible intruder.

No intruder was found. Her family said Sonja had been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. Court documents filed by prosecutors said Massey appeared to be “calm, possibly unwell, and non-aggressive.”

While another deputy was clearing the house, Grayson began “aggressively yelling” at Massey to put down a pot of boiling water she removed from her stove, although he had given her permission to do so.

“The body-camera footage shows Grayson and another deputy speaking calmly with Massey in her home – at which point she goes to the stove to turn off a pot of boiling water. She then picks up the pot and the other deputy steps back, “away from your hot steaming water,” he says.

“I rebuke you in the name of Jesus,” Massey says in response.

“Huh?” the deputy says.

“I rebuke you in the name of Jesus,” she repeats.

“You better f\*\*king not or I swear to God I’ll f\*\*king shoot you in the f\*\*king face,” Grayson says.

He then draws his firearm and points it at her, and she ducks and says, “I’m sorry” while lifting the pot, the video shows.

“Drop the f\*\*king pot!” both deputies’ yell.

Three shots are heard. After a few seconds of silence, one deputy says, “shots fired” and calls for emergency medical services. The implication was that Massey shot first, even though she had no gun.

Afterwards Massey was taken to the hospital where she died. The case was referred to the Illinois state Police Sheriff.

On July 8 after an autopsy, it showed Massey had died from a single gunshot wound to the face.

On July 11, national civil rights and personal injury attorney Ben Crump announced he has been retained by the family of Massey.

On July 12, a two-hour protest at Sangamon County Building demanding the release of body camera footage and transparency in the case is staged. More protests recur on July 15-16.

On July 17, Massey family members review the body camera footage (summarized above) of the sheriff’s deputies. A Sangamon County grand jury indicted Grayson on five counts, including three counts of first-degree murder. He is arrested and surrenders to the police.

Grayson was terminated as a deputy. It was announced that body camera footage would be released to the public on July 22. A protest rally drew about 200 supporters to the Springfield NAACP Building.

On July 18 Grayson makes his first appearance in Sangamon County court. Grayson pleads not guilty to all five counts. The judge denied Grayson’s petition to be released.

### **July 19 funeral, July 22 release of body cam**

On July 19 Massey’s funeral is held at Ruby Funeral Services & Chapel. Eulogizing Massey, Crump said the body cam footage would “shock the conscience of America,” similar to images of Emmett Till, a teenager whose lynching in 1955 galvanized the Civil Rights Movement.

On July 22 Sangamon County releases sheriff’s deputies’ body cam footage to the public, nearly two weeks after Sonya Massey was murdered.

Protesters march in Massey’s memory from Pleasant Grove Baptist Church to Comer Cox Park on South Martin Luther King Jr. Drive.

On July 23, Illinois Democratic Gov. JB Pritzker and Lt. Gov. Juliana Stratton meet with members of the Massey family at Union Baptist Church in Springfield.

At a press conference at Springfield NAACP Building, Ben Crump says the U.S. Department of Justice has opened an investigation into the Sonya Massey case.

The fast-moving response to a police officer killing of a Black person by the police is rare. Once again it took the horror of a video to show the criminal police actions.

The fact that the state police and county moved quickly to fire and prosecute Grayson shows the impact of the Black Lives Matters movement over the last few years.

### **Family demands full justice**

The family of Sonya Massey is calling for a probe into the hiring of a sheriff's deputy who worked at six law enforcement agencies in four years and was charged with driving under the influence twice.

Massey is one of a number of Black women who have been killed by police in their own homes in recent years, including Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky, in 2020.

In a news conference July 22, Crump connected Massey's death to other cases of police violence against Black people across the US.

Massey's father, James Wilburn, said during a news conference he initially received conflicting information from law enforcement.

"I was under the impression that a prowler had broken in and killed my baby. Never did they say that it was a deputy-involved shooting until my brother read it on the internet," Wilburn said.

At the news conference, Crump called her killing "senseless on every level."

Crump referenced what Grayson said - "I'll f\*\*king shoot you in the f\*\*king face" - before Massey was shot.

"Black women don't get the consideration and the respect in America," Crump said.

### **A 'crime against humanity'**

Rallies as part of the National Day of Mourning on July 28 occurred in New York, Los Angeles, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C., among other places.

The Rev. Al Sharpton from the civil rights group, National Action Network, along with Massey family members, will participate in a rally in Chicago Tuesday (July 30) evening, Crump said.

Some communities have already begun hosting vigils for Massey. Community members gathered in Kansas City, Cedar Rapids, Iowa; and Wilmington, North Carolina on Friday, July 26.

"Murdering unarmed citizens is a crime against humanity," Sonya Patrick, the chair of Wilmington's Black Lives Matter chapter and the region's Black Leadership Caucus, said at the vigil, according to the Port City Daily.

### **Kamala Harris calls family**

Kamala Harris, vice president and presumptive Democratic Party presidential nominee, spoke with Massey's family.

"Sonya Massey deserved to be safe," Harris said in a statement. "After she called the police for help, she was tragically killed in her own home at the hands of a responding officer sworn to protect and serve. Doug [her husband] and I send strength and prayers to Sonya's family and friends, and we join them in grieving her senseless death."

Massey's father, James Wilburn, told NBC News that Harris gave the family her condolences, "and she let us know that she is with us 100%, that this senseless killing must stop."

“It’s made me feel a lot better today,” Wilburn said.

Shadia Massey, Sonya Massey’s cousin, told the outlet that Harris’ call “broke every last one of us down.”

“Out of all the phone calls, all the thousands and thousands of messages, and phone calls and inboxes, this one here really meant the world to our family,” Shadia Massey said.

Tahir Duckett, a civil rights lawyer and activist and executive director of Georgetown Law’s Center for Innovations in Community Safety, noted in a July 24 essay for The New York Times the broader context of the killing and police “reforms”:

“The death of George Floyd in 2020 drew public outrage and calls for a wide variety of police reforms. There is still a lot we don’t know about the Massey situation, including if she was experiencing mental distress. But the killing of Ms. Massey is a cold reminder of how little has changed in the years since.”

“It’s true,” he continued, “that there have been piecemeal reforms at the state and local level. But at the federal level, the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act was unable to get past partisan gridlock in the Senate — and, in any case, many experts agree that the act would not do enough to reduce rates of police violence in the United States.”

“Mr. Grayson was fired and charged with first-degree murder, but that is unlikely to reduce rates of police violence,” he said.

Justice for victims of police violence and killings will require much more than reforms. Policing as it exists must be abolished and replaced.

**Malik Miah**

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