

Death toll mounts as Alabama law enforcement confronts mentally ill



By [Lee Roop](#) | lroop@al.com

[Email the author](#) | [Follow on Twitter](#)

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Editor's note: This is the latest in an ongoing [AL.com](#) investigation into the mental health crisis in Alabama.

Daniel Eric Blackmon of Marshall County got in his truck on the morning of April 16 and started driving. He had his shotgun with him.

Blackmon, 38, wounded four motorists in two counties before law enforcement could catch up with him. He died in a shootout, and a sheriff's deputy said it was a crime spree with "no rhyme or reason."

But there was a reason. "The bipolar had come to the top," Blackmon's father told AL.com the following day. His son was off his medication and "seeing demons" before the shootings, Randy Blackmon said. He had taken his father on a wild ride the night before that included visiting what he believed to be the portal of Hell in downtown Gadsden.

Not typical, but not rare

Blackmon's break with reality wasn't typical. Seriously mentally ill people off their medication can roam, but they often end up in distress close to home. And Alabama's police officers and deputies typically can defuse such encounters, taking mentally ill people to jail until better care is available.

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But while Blackmon's case isn't typical, it also isn't exactly rare. Ten Alabama men and women with mental illness have been killed by police or deputies since the beginning of 2015, according to a database compiled by the *Washington Post* and news reports in AL.com and other Alabama media.

In each of those cases, police lives were also on the line. And so, potentially, were the lives of citizens caught in the middle.

That's one reason Alabama's sheriffs say they need help. Most of the 40 sheriffs and chief deputies who responded to an AL.com survey this year said they had people in their jails needing mental health care at the time a reporter called. Most said they had trouble finding that care for people in their custody. Most said their officers weren't trained to deal with a mental health crisis.

Every day somewhere

Untreated serious mental illness is the long-form description of what police and sheriffs are facing. At times, it leads to fatal encounters.

"Law enforcement understands it because they're dealing with it every day," retired New Windsor, N.Y., police chief Michael Biasotti said in an August interview. Biasotti has a daughter with mental illness, and he is an advocate for training all police officers – not just some – to deal with it.

"I find it, as a police officer, pretty hard to fault a police officer," Biasotti said of fatal confrontations. "Every situation is, of course, different, and I'm sure there are some where the officer could have taken more time.

"But in most cases," Biasotti said, "you're trained to protect your life and somebody's else's life. You respond to a level of threat, and when the level of threat starts off with something that could be deadly force – the guy's coming at you with a knife – you meet that with the same force. Deadly force back."

"It's not your job to determine why he's trying to kill you."

Five had guns

Of the 10 mentally ill Alabamians fatally shot by police or deputies since the start of 2015, authorities say five had guns, three had either knives or a box cutter, one had a BB gun and one had a large spoon.

Here are the nine other fatal confrontations between Alabama authorities and the mentally ill since the start of 2015, starting with the next-most recent.

1. April 3, 2016: Melissa Boarts, 36, was shot by Auburn police on a street in Macon County. Officers were responding to a report of a suicidal person, and Boarts reportedly threatened them with a knife.

2. Oct. 4, 2015: Eric Edgell, 27, shot at Muscle Shoals and Sheffield officers responding to a report of a man with a gun threatening suicide. Edgell's fiancée said he suffered from depression, anxiety and PTSD. He reportedly turned his gun on officers and fired.

3. Sept. 19, 2015: Scott Beech, 57, was stopped by a Washington County, Ala., deputy responding to a domestic dispute call. Beech, wildly upset, pointed a handgun at the deputy, who tried to knock it out of his hand. Beech pointed the gun again, reports said, and the deputy shot him.

4. Aug. 20, 2015: Jeffery Ray Tevis, 50, was shocked with a stun gun and then shot by Tuscaloosa police after running at an officer with a large spoon and grappling with him. Family members said he was having "a mental episode" at the time.

5. May 25, 2015: Anthony Briggs, 36, was shot by Huntsville police after attacking his brother and neighbor with a knife and running at officers with the knife in his hands. Briggs had a personality disorder.

6. March 19, 2015: Shane Watkins, 39, was shot by Lawrence County deputies who say he lunged at them with a knife. Watkins' family said he was delusional and off his medication.

7. March 11, 2015: William Russel Smith, 53, was shot by Hoover police who went to his apartment on a domestic disturbance call and found him with a gun. Smith's family told police Smith was off his medication.

8. Feb. 20, 2015: Douglas Harris, 77, was shot by a Birmingham police officer who went along with firefighters to Harris' apartment to check on his welfare. Harris, who suffered from dementia, pointed a gun at the officer.

9. Feb. 11, 2015, Fletcher Ray Stewart, 46, was shot by a Tallapoosa County deputy after a chase. He had a BB gun and waved it at the deputy. Stewart's family said he was mentally ill.

In each of these confrontations, the responding officers and deputies came home, although one was wounded and others could have been. But Biasotti said there's another risk for law enforcement.

'You will see lawsuits'

When he was a chief, Biasotti said his department's K-9 handlers constantly trained with their dogs. It was an active unit, and most of the lawsuits against his department involved the K-9 team.

"The police chief always gets sued because the training isn't adequate," Biasotti said. Plaintiffs' attorneys routinely look at adding training to a lawsuit, he said.

"You will see lawsuits," he predicted if Alabama law enforcement continues to respond to these calls without the training that's available.

Lawsuits are a familiar first step toward government action in Alabama, and it may be a lawsuit with a big payout that forces change in how the state responds to the seriously mentally ill.

Cases where innocent bystanders die can also lead to change. Alabama narrowly avoided that in April when Daniel Eric Blackmon got in his truck and tried to outrun and outgun his demons.

Federal pressure can also lead to change. This month, the [**U.S. Department of Justice**](#) reported that it was repeatedly running into the problem of police encounters with the mentally ill while investigating claims of racial discrimination and excessive force.

Whatever it takes

Sheriffs say, as state services drop, they are arresting more individuals in mental health crisis. Yet deputies are trained to focus on safety, for the public and for officers. They are not trained in mental health treatment.

Meanwhile, the mentally ill face greater safety risks as they find themselves confronted by armed officers, often charged with a minor crime and placed in jail because there is nowhere else for deputies to take them.

If it takes a horror story to drive change in Alabama, a county sheriff or a deputy or a small-town police officer will probably have been first on the scene and also at risk along with the person seeing demons and needing help.

"Police are the only ones who can't do what the mental health system does," national mental health advocate D.J. Jaffee told AL.Com, "and that's just turn away."

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