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Hesse's police students learn from the Sammy Baker case

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Wetzlar/Giessen. Sammy Baker from Wetzlar dies from police gunfire in Amsterdam. Now his mother has spoken about it to police students. This is how the lecturer assesses the exchange.

Ms. Kocab, why did you integrate the Sammy Baker case into your lessons?

As part of the degree course, we teach a wide range of topics relating to mental illness, later also in the form of further training. It is very important for the students to get into contact with those affected and their relatives. For example, we visit the Vitos Psychiatric Clinic and meet former addicts. The topic of mentally ill people is immensely important: many will experience it in their lives and many of the police officers will (have to) deal with it in their professional lives. The topic has always been anchored in the course, but we are trying to link it even more with other subjects and want the students to have their own experiences - including talking to Sammy's mother.

Studies: Police officers confronted with mentally ill people in every fourth deployment

How often do police/crime officers encounter people with mental illness during operations?

It is estimated that every fourth to fifth contact between a police officer and a mentally ill person takes place. Police officers are not diagnosticians and do not diagnose on the spot whether a person was mentally ill or not. However, the latest studies estimate that this figure is around 20 percent. In other words, there is a contact in every fifth deployment if mentally ill people are assumed, otherwise in every fourth deployment if people in exceptional mental health and crisis situations are included.



Justine Seewald-Krieger, here at the demonstration on the first anniversary of Sammy's death in Amsterdam, spoke to prospective police and criminal investigators in Giessen.

Justine Seewald-Krieger

Rising trend?

In general, we assume that mental illness is more socially accepted. So we know that the numbers are rising, but we can't say exactly whether this is because more people are suffering from mental illness or because people are more open about the issue and are more willing to see a specialist these days or are more likely to be referred to one by their GP.

What do you teach at the police academy?

As a professor of psychology and operational training, I initially teach psychological topics. In the first semester, the main focus is on perception and memory, i.e. the basics of psychology. We discuss questions such as: How is human behavior explained? How does it come about? Is it me or the situation that influences human behavior? The area of communication is also very important, there is communication training, dealing with people in exceptional psychological situations, stress management, dealing with aggression and violence. I also accompany the operational training, in which such situations are practiced in role plays and how to deal with suicidal or psychotic people.



Kerstin Kocab, Professor of Psychology and Operational Training at the Hessian University of Applied Sciences for Public Management and Security, invited Sammy Baker's mother to an exchange.

When and how did you take up the Sammy Baker case?

I became aware of the case via a podcast, I had already heard about it. We talked about psychosis and schizophrenia in class and took a close look at the case of Sammy Baker. We wanted to understand and empathize with how the mother may have experienced those days and find out what behavior she herself recognized in Sammy. It was about asking questions - including what the police did wrong and what should have been done differently in terms of tactics. We also discussed the delivery of a death notice.

What do you hope to gain from the exchange with Sammy's mother?

I think that once you've heard from someone how they've experienced it when things aren't going well, you have that in your head. If you find yourself in a similar situation, you have more incentive to do better yourself. If images and people can be linked and I have heard what it feels like, I may develop more empathy myself in a similar situation.



Protesters demand justice for Sammy Baker in Amsterdam in 2021. Among them was Sammy Baker's mother.

The Sammy case - an example of how things shouldn't work?

I'm not an operational trainer and I wasn't there, but in the Sammy case in particular, I have the impression that the Dutch police misjudged the situation and lost sight of the police's operational objective - there is a person who needs medical help. Deployment situations involving mentally ill people are often not easy to resolve. If a strategy doesn't work or a person doesn't respond to my approach, it quickly becomes overwhelming because there are no options for action. Situations that overwhelm us are unpleasant and should end as quickly as possible. In police jargon, this is referred to as a premature desire to end the situation. This could have played a role in Sammy's case.

How did the students react to Sammy's mother?

Very affected. This was evident not only from the complete silence in the room during Ms. Seewald-Krieger's report, but also from the empathetic questions and words of gratitude for the exchange. The students were interested in various aspects and asked, for example, how exactly she found out about her son's death, what the current status of the proceedings is and whether she had any tips for prospective police and criminal investigators on how to behave better in such a situation.



On August 13, 2020, Sammy Baker was shot dead by police in a courtyard in the Nieuw-West district of Amsterdam.

Your conclusion?

Of course, I was a bit nervous myself about what the encounter would be like. At the end of the day, it's still police officers meeting the mother of a child who was killed by the police. But I have to say that the exchange was very appreciative and beneficial for the students. I also received this feedback from the students. One student approached me and would now like to write his thesis in this area, motivated by this exchange.

Interview by Tanja Freudenmann