

Oklahoma ex-cop guilty of rape in sex abuse case involving 13 women

2015-12-10

chicagotribune.com

A former Oklahoma City police officer was convicted Thursday of raping and sexually victimizing eight women on his police beat in a minority, low-income neighborhood.

Daniel Holtzclaw, who turned 29 Thursday, sobbed as the verdict was read aloud. Jurors convicted him on 18 counts involving eight of the 13 women who had accused him; the jury acquitted him on another 18 counts.

He could spend the rest of his life in prison based on the jury's recommendation that he serve a total of 263 years, including a 30-year sentence on each of four first-degree rape convictions. He was also convicted of forcible oral sodomy, sexual battery, procuring lewd exhibition and second-degree rape.

The jury deliberated for about 45 hours over four days. Holtzclaw's sentencing is set for Jan. 21. A judge will decide whether he will have to serve the sentences consecutively.

Holtzclaw's father — a police officer in Enid, about 100 miles northwest of Oklahoma City — his mother and sister were in the courtroom as the verdict was read. At least one accuser was present, as well as several black community leaders. Seven armed deputies were stationed around the room.

Holtzclaw's defense attorney, Scott Adams, declined to comment after the verdict was read.

"Justice was done today, and a criminal wearing a uniform is going to prison now," Oklahoma County District Attorney David Prater said. "In those counts where the not guilty verdicts came back, they determined that we didn't prove those cases beyond a reasonable doubt. It doesn't mean they didn't believe the victims."

The lead detective in the case, Kim Davis, said after the verdict: "I feel horrible for his family. It's brutal, but I think justice was served."

The allegations against Holtzclaw brought new attention to the problem of sexual misconduct committed by law enforcement officers, something police chiefs have studied for years.

During a monthlong trial, jurors heard from 13 women who said Holtzclaw sexually victimized them. Most of them said Holtzclaw stopped them while out on patrol, searched them for outstanding warrants or checked to see if they were carrying drug paraphernalia, then forced himself on them.

Holtzclaw's attorney, meanwhile, described him as a model police officer whose attempts to help the drug addicts and prostitutes he came in contact with were distorted.

Among the eight women Holtzclaw was convicted of attacking was a grandmother in her 50s, who launched the police investigation and who was in the courtroom Thursday. She said she was driving home after 2 a.m. when Holtzclaw pulled her over. He first asked her if she had been drinking, then ordered her out of the car and into the backseat of his squad car. He then stood over her and ordered her to perform oral sex.

The woman was tearful after the verdict and prayed with supporters outside the courtroom.

She was the first victim to testify. The last was a teenager who was 17 when Holtzclaw attacked her. Holtzclaw was convicted of three charges related to her case: first-degree rape, second-degree rape and sexual battery.

The teenager recalled Holtzclaw pulling up in his police car as she walked home one night in June 2014. Holtzclaw drove her home and walked her to her door, where he told her he had to search her. She said he grabbed her breasts, then pulled down her shorts before forcing them off and raping her.

Despite the number of victims, the case presented prosecutors with several challenges.

Many of the women had arrest records or histories of drug abuse. Holtzclaw's attorney made those issues a cornerstone of his defense strategy. Adams questioned several women at length about whether they were high when they allegedly encountered Holtzclaw. He also pointed out that most did not come forward until police identified them as possible victims after launching their investigation.

Ultimately, that approach did not sway the jury to dismiss all the women's stories.

Holtzclaw was convicted of one of two charges related to a woman who testified he gave her a ride home, then followed her into her bedroom where he forced himself on her and raped her, telling her, "This is better than county jail."

That woman testified in orange scrubs and handcuffs because she had been jailed on drug charges hours before appearing in court. But the jury still convicted Holtzclaw of forcible oral sodomy in her case.

All of the accusers were black. Holtzclaw is half-white, half-Japanese. The jury appeared to all be white, though Oklahoma court officials said they did not have race information for jurors. Some supporters of the women questioned whether the jury would fairly judge their allegations.

A former college football star, Holtzclaw joined law enforcement after a brief attempt at pursuing an NFL career. Oklahoma City police chief Bill Citty fired Holtzclaw before the trial began.

Citty said in a statement Thursday night that the department was satisfied with the outcome of the "long and difficult trial and deliberation process."

"We are satisfied with the jury's decision and firmly believe justice was served," the statement said.

Holtzclaw's case was among those examined in an Associated Press investigation of sexual misconduct by law enforcement. The AP's yearlong probe revealed about 1,000 officers had lost their licenses for sex crimes or other sexual misconduct over a six-year period. Holtzclaw was not included in that count because he has not yet lost his license.

The AP's finding is undoubtedly an undercount of the problem of sexual abuse in law enforcement. Not every state has a process for banning problem officers from re-entering law enforcement, known as decertification. And of those states that do, great variations exist in whether officers are prosecuted or reported to their state licensing boards.

The mother of the 17-year-old victim told The Associated Press on Thursday night that she feels like justice has been served. The Associated Press generally does not identify victims of sex crimes and is not using the mother's name so as not to identify her daughter.

The mother said she believes the type of police crime brought to light by the Holtzclaw case "isn't just a problem in Oklahoma — it's a problem for the nation."

Associated Press

Copyright (c) 2016 Chicago Tribune