

Grand jury secrecy matters, as a teen experience attests: Peter Jedick (Opinion)

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I testified before a Cuyahoga County grand jury when I was 15 years old. In light of all the controversy surrounding the [Tamir Rice grand jury decision](#), I believe my experience might be helpful in understanding why the grand jury meets in secret and why we should not be [trying to change our justice system](#).

In the 1960s, I was a sophomore at West Tech High School on Cleveland's near West Side. After a Friday night football game, I was mugged. Three guys jumped me and one of them held a machete against my throat and demanded all my money.

He picked on the wrong guy. At the time I was only making \$2 an hour at the local A&P, so I gave him a dollar bill and some loose change, my entire pocket treasure.

He took it and told me to scram. But I eyeballed their getaway car's license number. When I got home, my dad called the cops and reported the incident. Then, about 2 a.m., there was a knock on our front door. A couple of detectives told us they already caught the guys.

They said the guy with the machete was a known criminal with a prison record and they wanted my help in putting him away.

They wanted me to come down to a lineup right then and identify him. But my mother was afraid of retaliation. She told my father we should just forget the whole thing.

My father, however, was a World War II vet who parachuted into France on D-Day. He wasn't about to be intimidated by a bunch of what he called "punks."

This is where the grand jury comes in. There are two reasons a grand jury meets in secrecy. First, so witnesses can speak freely without fear of retaliation. Second, it protects a defendant's reputation if there is really not much of a reason to prosecute. A grand jury does not decide innocence or guilt. It decides if there is enough evidence to continue to prosecute the case.

I don't know if the police explained that to my mother, but it would have eased her fears. So at the tender age of 15, I identified my attacker in a lineup and appeared before the grand jury.

I never did have to testify in his trial. Maybe they made a plea bargain. However, a few months later I saw a small article in the newspaper that said he was sentenced to prison for stealing something like \$1.96.

Which brings us to the Tamir Rice case.

As you all know, Cleveland's Tamir Rice shooting became one of the white cop/black victim cases that drew national attention by the "Black Life Matters" movement. And when the grand jury recently decided not to indict the white policemen who killed Tamir, Cuyahoga County Prosecutor Tim McGinty became the object of their rage.

The Cleveland Branch of the [NAACP plans to file a court motion](#) asking to release the transcripts of the grand jury's proceedings. Protesters have already camped out in front of McGinty's home. And more recently fliers threatening violence against him were posted in his neighborhood.

Will the judge who oversaw the grand jury be the next object of their scorn? And what about the 14 county citizens who were merely doing their public duty by serving on the grand jury? Will there be protests in front of their homes if the transcripts are released?

If we allow this public intimidation of our grand jury system to continue, we are in danger of becoming a Third World country like Mexico, where the police, judges and government officials all live in fear of criminals like El Chapo, the world's most powerful drug lord who was recently captured. Just because someone does not agree with a grand jury's decision does not give them the right to disrupt the process.

The grand jury system is an important part of the American judicial experience and has served us well for over 200 years.

We should respect the wisdom of our founding fathers instead of trashing it.

Peter Jedick is an author and historian from Rocky River.