

**A teen was accused of defacing a pro-police ‘back the blue’ sign. Now she has been charged with a hate crime.**

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By

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A sheriff’s deputy was wrapping up a routine traffic stop at a Utah gas station last week when he saw a teen take a “back the blue” sign — which urged support for police officers — and stomp on it after her friend was pulled over.

The teen, identified in court documents as 19-year-old Lauren Gibson, then allegedly crumpled it up in a “destructive manner” and threw it in a trash can, Garfield County Sheriff’s Deputy Cree Carter wrote in an affidavit. The officer, who accused Gibson of allegedly “smirking” at him “in an intimidating manner,” arrested her.

Now, in addition to disorderly conduct, Gibson has been charged with “criminal mischief” with a hate-crime enhancement. The latter crime, county prosecutors allege, was committed with “the intent to intimidate or terrorize another person” in violation of Utah’s 2019 hate-crime law.

“Due to the demeanor displayed by Gibson in attempts to intimate law enforcement while destroying a ‘Pro Law Enforcement’ sign the allegations are being treated as a ‘Hate Crime’ enhanced allegation,” Carter wrote in his affidavit.

The misdemeanor carries a maximum one-year sentence.

In 2019, Utah passed a law strengthening penalties against hate crimes to much celebration. The law also expanded the groups of people protected under the law — including not just personal attributes such as race and religion but also things like their “political expression” and “status as a law enforcement officer.” Louisiana and Kentucky have similarly passed laws protecting law enforcement under their hate-crime statutes.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Utah on Monday denounced the charge against Gibson.

“This kind of charging decision sends an extremely chilling message to the community that the government will seek harsher punishment for people charged with crimes who disagree with police actions,” the ACLU said in a statement, noting the statute may not support the charge against Gibson. The Garfield County attorney’s office did not respond to a request for comment late on Tuesday, nor did the sheriff’s office. Gibson could not be reached for comment.

In an interview with the Daily Beast, Gibson said the charges against her came as a shock. She’s not “anti-police,” she said. But she became upset when the deputy, she alleged, displayed an aggressive attitude toward her friend whom he had stopped for speeding. A friend traveling with the group had previously found a “back the blue” sign on the side of the road and kept it, so Gibson went and got it. Gibson told the Daily Beast that she indeed waved the “back the blue” sign at the deputy, stomped on it and threw it away, but “I don’t feel like I did anything wrong.”

“Back the blue” is a general slogan to show solidarity with law enforcement, and it is often featured alongside a “thin blue line” flag.

The college student does not appear to be the only person Utah prosecutors have charged with a law enforcement-related hate crime. In August 2020, the Garfield County sheriff’s office arrested 32-year-old Joseph Dawson for pulling down a similar “back the blue” sign and spray-painting in pink letters the word “bisexual” over the word “blue,” the Daily Beast reported.

Dawson was charged with a hate crime in that incident. He was convicted and sentenced to two days in jail and a year of probation, the Daily Beast reported.

When Gibson was in custody, she told the Daily Beast, the deputy seemingly referred to Dawson's case. "He told me, 'Do you want to know what happened to the last person that got arrested for this?'" she said. "He was kind of threatening me in that way."

Before the Utah hate-crime law was signed in April 2019, the ACLU of Utah was "wary" of its passage, arguing, among other things, that it could damage citizens' right to free speech.

"It is not hard to imagine, for example, that a prosecutor might argue that membership in Black Lives Matter should be used as evidence of bias, even though that is not true," the Utah ACLU argued in February 2019, only months before the bill was signed.

For her part, Gibson said she found it strange that status as a law enforcement officer was included as a protected category under the law.

"If it was a dentist's sign or something and I just crushed a dentist sign or something in front of them, like, nothing would have happened," she told the Daily Beast. "It's the same thing. It's just an occupation."