



Written by [Ralph R. Reiland](#) on July 19, 2010

“I Won’t Die for a \$9 Pie!”

“As I tell my kids, dessert is not a right,” declared Michelle Obama recently, promoting her anti-obesity agenda while addressing the annual NAACP convention. I’d say the same thing about pizza deliveries in a war zone. There’s no right to have a pizza delivered in a neighborhood where drivers have to worry about dodging bullets in order to get to the front door.



The recent headlines on the TV evening news in Pittsburgh tell the story. “Pizza Delivery Driver Shot in Hill District One Day After Police Warning.”

It was early afternoon on a Sunday, a time when people in less dysfunctional neighborhoods are reading the Sunday paper on the porch. “The shooting,” reported the TV news, “happened at about 1:30 p.m. Sunday afternoon along Bedford Avenue. The driver was shot several times in the chest and leg.”

More specifically, as reported by the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, “An Uptown pizza delivery driver almost lost his life yesterday over a steak hoagie, half an Italian hoagie and \$20.” You’d think the shooter would have ordered a whole Italian, since he had no intention of paying.

The steak hoagie and half Italian came from Pizza Bellagio where Shokir Khoja is the store manager and part owner. “They think that’s what a person’s life is worth over there” said Khoja, speaking of the high-crime neighborhood.

The driver, 26, was shot three times, in the head, chest and left thigh. The shooter was hiding in a subsidized Great Society stairwell at the Bedford Dwellings housing complex.

A few days earlier, pizza drivers were robbed in three other sections of Pittsburgh — on Knox Avenue in Carrick, Locust Street in Mount Oliver, and in Braddock. “Police said two people punched the driver in the face and held him at gunpoint,” reported the news. “The robbers took his money and the pizza before running off.” In the Braddock case, the pizza shop owner trying to make a delivery was shot in the arm.

“We’ve had a rash of pizza delivery robberies in the city,” explained police officer Sgt. James Vogel at the Zone 2 station in the Hill District. “They’ve been a lot more prevalent in the last couple weeks than at any point in time.”

The Pittsburgh Police issued some precautions for delivery drivers: “Beware of dark and unlit properties. If not familiar and uncomfortable with surroundings, do not get out of the vehicle and immediately return to the business. Remember, safety first. Being injured is not worth the cost of a pizza.”

Unfortunately, there’s nothing new about any of this. Eighteen years ago, a case of discriminatory “redlining” against Pizza Hut was brought before the Human Relations Commission (HRC) in Pittsburgh after Carl and Shelia Truss, a black couple in the upper Hill District, couldn’t get a sausage pizza



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delivered on the night of May 2, 1992, the fourth day of rioting following the Rodney King verdict.

“We wanted to err on the side of caution,” testified Mike Logan, the Pizza Hut manager, at the HRC hearing. The rioting had spread from Los Angeles to San Francisco, Las Vegas, Atlanta, and other cities, especially targeting white-owned stores and delivery vehicles that were allegedly “exploiting the black community.”

By the time the Marines, Army and National Guard had restored order, the price included 53 deaths, thousands of injuries and over \$1 billion in financial losses.

“We had drivers robbed every day,” testified a Pizza Hut driver at the HRC hearing. “In East Liberty, we had the same driver robbed three times in one day. They usually robbed us with a gun.”

Another pizza driver paraded on the sidewalk outside the HRC hearing with a sign that summed up the how things looked from the drivers’ perspective at the street level - “I Won’t Die for a \$9 Pie.”

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