New round of police violence hits New York area

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The fatal shooting of a 65-year-old New York City man by an undercover detective early Friday morning is the latest incident in a spate of police violence across the metropolitan area. Sylvester, known as Rocky to friends in his Harlem neighborhood, was shot in the chest by the plainclothes cop, who was frisking the man's son.

The police claimed that Sylvester lunged at the detective with a knife. Family members, however, said that the cop fired without warning and failed to identify himself as a police officer. Friends and family members staged a protest march in Harlem Saturday, demanding an investigation into the killing.

The fatal incident in Harlem followed a police shooting in Brooklyn last Monday night that left a 30-year-old single mother, Vivian Rodriguez, in serious condition with a gunshot wound to the abdomen. Two other recent episodes in nearby New Jersey communities have left 20-year-old Michael Newkirk of Newark, and 17-year-old Jose Ives Jr. of Weehawken, dead.

State figures indicate that the number of people either killed or seriously wounded as a result of police shootings in New Jersey during the first seven months of this year are higher than those recorded for all of 2002. Between January and July, 10 people have been killed and another 16 suffered serious wounds from police bullets. For all of last year there were a total of 6 killed and 18 wounded by police in the state.

This latest round of police violence has erupted even as controversy has yet to subside over two highly publicized New York police raids last May that led to the deaths of two innocent and unarmed people.

Ousmane Zongo, an immigrant from Burkina Faso, was shot to death by a police officer May 22 in the Manhattan warehouse where he worked on African art. The cops were carrying out a raid on a bootleg video operation allegedly based in the building where he worked. The man's family arrived in the city at the end of last month and announced a $150 million wrongful death lawsuit.

Earlier in May, 57-year-old Alberta Spruill died as the result of police use of a concussion grenade in a raid on her Harlem apartment, which the cops had misidentified as a drug location.

The common feature tying together all of these cases is the way in which police officers immediately resorted to grossly disproportionate force. Descriptions of procedures used in the fatal police raids bear resemblance to those used in a military assault—involving stun grenades, bulletproof ballistic shields, forced entrance, large numbers of officers and, especially, drawn weapons.

The raid on the Brooklyn apartment where Ms. Rodriguez was shot was part of an investigation into a commercial burglary operation. Her relatives insist that she had no connection to any such activity. The apartment was known throughout the neighborhood as a place where various consumer goods could be cheaply obtained, and where used goods could be sold for cash. The man who allegedly ran the store was not present in the apartment when the raid occurred. Ms. Rodriguez was holding a cell phone when officers flooded the apartment.

Similarly, in the Newark shooting as many as 15 police cars and dozens of officers—with guns drawn—responded to reports of rowdiness and drug activity at a cookout in a parking lot. Newark police contend that as officers approached the scene Mr. Newkirk drew a pistol from his waistband and raised it at them. Witnesses, however, said that Mr. Newkirk was unarmed and holding a bottle of liquor when he

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stumbled while complying with cops' orders to lay face down on the sidewalk. They said officers responded by shooting him in the head.

Comments issued by local authorities in the aftermath of these incidents are a combination of cowardly diversions and crude innuendo. New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, quoted in the *New York Times*, seemed to express relief in emphasizing that the officers had in fact located the correct apartment in the Brooklyn raid, and defensively pointed out that stolen goods had actually been found there.

Bloomberg gave the impression that the recovery of stolen property justified the shooting of an unarmed woman. Such carnage is apparently viewed as mere collateral damage if the raid is otherwise successful.

A spokesman for the Newark Police Department, Detective Todd McClendon, offered a similarly empty excuse for his department's role in the death of Mr. Newkirk, noting that the neighborhood around the parking lot where the cookout and shooting occurred "is a high narcotics area."

New York City police in particular have a long history of fatal shootings of innocent victims, most notoriously the 1999 murder of another unarmed African immigrant, Amadou Diallo, who died in a hail of 41 bullets while standing in the vestibule of his own apartment building. While Bloomberg's predecessor Rudolph Giuliani raised tensions to the boiling point with his aggressive defense of the most egregious police behavior, it is obvious from the recent shootings that the only thing that has changed under Bloomberg is a slight softening of City Hall's public relations style.

This official defense of routine police violence no doubt encourages the type of enraged behavior that contributed to the death of Mr. Ives. The officer in that case, 21-year-old Alejandro Jaramillo, has pleaded not guilty, in spite of an autopsy report corroborating witness statements that Mr. Ives suffered two traumatic blows to the head while he was already down on the pavement.

The Weehawken teenager—who sustained multiple skull fractures during his encounter with the off-duty officer—slipped into a coma and succumbed to the injuries the officer contends were sustained in a single fall to the pavement. Prior to the altercation, the officer had threatened the victim's two younger siblings with a broomstick for allegedly tampering with car alarms. After encountering the three again on the street about 45 minutes later, he followed and verbally harassed them over the course of about two blocks. The cop reportedly jumped Ives when he turned to face the officer. He has since been charged with murder.

The events in Newark, Weehawken and New York have provoked isolated demonstrations of outrage, including small rallies and warnings from local leaders that continued police abuse could provoke broader social unrest.

Indeed, the use of military-style tactics, and the increasing application of deadly force against individuals who pose little or no threat to police, is a barometer of the social tensions that have been exacerbated by mounting unemployment and deepening social inequality in the New York metropolitan area.

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