

# New York police shoot down disturbed youth—thought hairbrush was a gun

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In the wake of another brutal police shooting of an unarmed individual, New York City officials and sections of the mass media have rushed to exonerate the cops involved and contain popular anger in one of the city's more impoverished neighborhoods.

The victim in the shooting incident Monday night was 18-year-old Khiel Coppin, a Trinidadian immigrant with a history of mental problems. His mother had called 911 seeking assistance after her son had become unruly inside her apartment.

Instead of help, however, she got a police firing squad that unleashed a hail of 20 bullets at Khiel within 14 minutes of arriving on the scene. He was struck by 10 of the bullets, 2 of which ripped through his lung and intestines, killing him. The police on the scene said that they believed the youth was armed, but what they said they thought was a gun turned out to be only a hairbrush.

Less than 24 hours after the killing, Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly called a press conference at One Police Plaza to announce that the five police officers who opened fire appeared to have been acting "within department guidelines, as officers fired at someone they reasonably believed to be about to use deadly force against them." He claimed that a number of eyewitnesses had corroborated the cops' contention that the 18-year-old had ignored their orders to halt and had lunged at them with a dark object.

Some police officials have suggested that the incident can be chalked up to "suicide by cop," a rationalization of the killing that was echoed dutifully by an editorial in Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* Wednesday.

Acknowledging that "few situations are as potentially inflammatory as a police shooting of a young, unarmed civilian," the *Post* assures its readers that the incident "sounds an awful lot like 'suicide by cop,' where the

troubled victim deliberately provokes a confrontation that ends in police gunfire." It concludes with a warning that "there may yet be an attempt to exploit the tragedy."

In fact, the fatal shooting has already sparked anger in the streets of Bedford-Stuyvesant, where neighbors have held candlelight vigils and angry residents have marched on the 79th Precinct stationhouse.

Both Khiel's family and some who witnessed the killing have disputed the police version of events.

"Sometimes things don't go the way we want them to, and sometimes we handle things wrong," said Reginald Owens, the boy's stepfather. "But the most important thing is that when you are trained, when you have the authority under you of the law to go out and execute the law, you should do that, but without killing somebody. He didn't have to be killed."

One neighbor dismissed the department's defense of the cops in an interview with NY1 news television. "They always think they have good reason," he said. "Then the mayor backs them up, the governor backs them up. There is no good reason to open fire on a teenager the way they did."

In particular, the family objected to the NYPD's self-serving use of an audiotape of the 911 call made by Khiel's mother, Denise Owens, in which the youth could be heard in the background yelling, "I've got a gun." In fact, in a second telephone conversation with 911, Ms. Owens made it clear that he was not armed. She also told a police captain in charge of the squad that showed up at her door the same thing.

Some eyewitnesses told the press that, while Khiel did not comply with police orders to halt and get down on the ground, when they told him to put up his hand, he did so and dropped the hairbrush. It was after that, they said, that the cops opened fire. They also said that

one of the officers shouted out for the others to stop shooting.

Ms. Owens's call to the police came after she had called the psychiatric mobile crisis team at Interfaith Medical Center to seek help for her son, who was not taking prescribed anti-psychotic and anti-depressant drugs. One of the hospital's psych teams came to the Brooklyn apartment, but the youth had gone out. About a half hour after the team had left, Khiel returned and, desperate over his deteriorating mental state, his mother called 911.

The killing in Bedford-Stuyvesant recalls earlier killings—like that of Sean Bell a year ago and that of Amadou Diallo in 1999—in which New York police have rained bullets down upon unarmed men. In the Diallo case, officers of the since-disbanded Street Crimes Unit claimed that they thought a wallet that the African immigrant was taking out to show his identification was a gun.

Nor is Khiel Coppin by any means the first emotionally disturbed person to be shot down by police rather than rendered needed medical assistance. In 1999, Gidone Busch, a 31-year-old man with a long history of mental problems, was killed by cops in the orthodox Jewish neighborhood of Borough Park, prompting angry demonstrations.

The claim that the police in this case were operating within “department guidelines” may well prove legally defensible. Both the NYPD and the Brooklyn District Attorney's Office are conducting investigations of the killing, but it is highly unlikely that any of the cops involved will be criminally prosecuted.

The real issue in this incident and the many others that have preceded it are the social and political imperatives that ultimately determine the methods of the NYPD, the largest police department in the United States.

The principal function of this force of 35,000 armed personnel is to police what is the starkest social divide in America, maintaining the status quo in a city in which the wealthiest 20 percent of the population boasts incomes that are 52 times those of New Yorkers in the bottom 20 percent. It is a city that is home to the greatest concentration of multimillionaires and billionaires in the country, and in which a record 9,300 families sleep in the city's homeless shelters each night.

Under these conditions, the police carry out relentless enforcement against the poorest section of the population, while protecting the power and privileges of the wealthiest. According to the NYPD's own figures, last year New York cops stopped and frisked more than half a million people—90 percent of whom were not engaged in any unlawful activity at the time. Some 86 percent of those stopped were either black or Hispanic.

Complaints of police brutality and abuse, meanwhile, have risen sharply in the past several years. In the first 10 months of this year, they were up 18.4 percent over the same period of 2006, reaching 21,341 separate complaints. Of these, 6,390 were for excessive force, while 11,290 were over abuses of authority.

In the poorest neighborhoods of the city, the police force serves as a virtual occupying force, maintaining the status quo and inevitably arousing hostility. Under these conditions, fear and brutality are inevitable byproducts.

The gunning down of an 18-year-old with serious mental problems also underscores the acute crisis that exists in America relating to the treatment of the seriously mentally ill, in which particularly those without financial resources are relegated to the prisons and delivered into the hands of the police.

As part of the elaborate presentation that the police commissioner put on Tuesday to defend the actions of the officers involved in the shooting, several pieces of paper with notes jotted down by the murdered youth were presented to the media, apparently with the aim of showing that he was bent on taking his own life.

His mother told a reporter that in addition to enjoying basketball and music, Khiel also liked to draw and to write poems and short stories. “Those closest 2 death iz closer to happiness,” one note read. “Truly that's why more bums smile than millionaires.”



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