

# California police shootings prompt popular outrage

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A string of police shootings in California in recent weeks have provoked popular outrage. On the evening of July 3, two BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) police officers responded to a report of an intoxicated man with an open container at the Civic Center BART station in San Francisco. Less than a minute after arriving at the platform, the officers had shot and killed 5' 8", 150-pound Charles Hill, a 45-year-old homeless man. Charles Hill is the third person killed by BART police in less than three years.

Officers allege that Hill had threatened them with a knife and broken bottle. Many witnesses say officers were at a safe distance from Hill and could have easily handled the situation with non-lethal force. Nonetheless, BART's police chief Kenton Rainey publicly declared that he was "comfortable" with his officer's performance. Officers involved in Hill's killing have been placed on paid administrative leave.

Many people were so deeply moved by the killing that they began a small but energetic protest campaign under the banner of "Justice for Charles Hill," modeled on the campaign organized after BART police murdered another man, Oscar Grant, on a platform in 2009. The protest of about 150 people demanded officers be held accountable and that the BART police department be shut down. Among those present were family members of Oscar Grant and the mothers of other victims of police violence.

The protest was quickly surrounded by police and eventually forcibly repressed. BART spokesman Linton Johnson condescendingly told protesters they had "succeeded" because their brief protest had disrupted train service, while warning that any further disruption would be met with "zero tolerance."

Public anger was further stoked by the fact that BART officials had the only video of the incident, refusing to release it for weeks. When it was finally released it only raised more questions. While the video shows the officer firing his weapon, Hill is nowhere in the shot. One can see an object, allegedly the knife Hill threw at the officer, circled in blue coming from the lower left-hand corner of the

screen as the officer puts on black gloves and goes in for the kill. It is unusual that BART cameras could not capture Hill, prompting media demands for more information. Without being able to see Hill's conduct, it is unclear if he is throwing something at the officer or surrendering it.

Only days later, on July 5, Fullerton police officers brutally beat homeless man Kelly Thomas to death. According to reports, Kelly died less than a week later in a local hospital. A video of witnesses describing the beating as it happens can be viewed here.

Responding to reports of someone breaking into cars, officers confronted Thomas, a schizophrenic transient who lived in downtown Fullerton and who was described by community members as "a passive and gentle person." Officers claim Thomas struggled with them, justifying their response. Although Thomas was unarmed, thin and of medium height, several officers apparently used so much force they left him with multiple, fatal head and neck injuries.

Thomas's father, a retired Orange County sheriff's deputy, said he is certain officers used excessive force. After viewing his son's mangled corpse he told the *Orange County Register* his son was "brutally beaten to death. ...When I first walked into the hospital, I looked at what his mother described as my son ... I didn't recognize him. ...This is cold-blooded, aggravated murder."

Witnesses viewing the beating were disgusted by the brutal and cowardly acts of the officers, citing the use of heavy flashlights to repeatedly pummel the victim and repeated use of Taser weapons—even after Thomas stopped moving. His father told media that Thomas was most likely unable to understand what was going on because he was off his medication.

Three weeks were required before the county coroner released the autopsy report, yet the cause of death was stated as "uncertain." For its part, the Fullerton Police Department initially released a report that one of the officers suffered a broken leg. This report was quickly withdrawn and police now claim that the officer's leg suffered "soft tissue

damage”—in others words, a bruise. As of July 31, five of the six officers involved in the beating were reassigned to “non-frontline patrol” positions. Sgt. Andrew Goodrich was the only member of the patrol not to be reassigned.

As of yet, there has been only slight news coverage and no apology or credible explanation of the incident.

Finally, on July 16, San Francisco police shot and killed Kenneth Harding Jr., a 19-year-old transit-goer. It is generally agreed that Harding was confronted by uniformed police officers in the city’s Bay View neighborhood as he emerged from a bus. When he was unable to produce proof of bus fare payment, Harding fled. Police reported that Harding then allegedly shot at them as they pursued him for failing to pay his fare. Along with several others, one video of the aftermath has been posted on YouTube.

A controversy has arisen over whether or not Kenneth Harding actually had a gun. While the police persist in claiming that Harding was armed, a gun was never found at the scene. Only several weeks later police announced they had found the weapon that fired the fatal shot.

Several witnesses adamantly deny that Harding fired on police. The outrage of witnesses is palpable in videos of police surrounding the flailing, bloody body of Harding with guns drawn for several minutes. As time passes without medical assistance, the crowd becomes angrier and many witnesses accuse officers of deliberate delay and lying about the reason for the killing.

Protests of several hundred people began shortly after Harding was pronounced dead at a local hospital. July 19 saw the largest protests, culminating in a march through the city. Forty-five protesters were arrested in the course of the nonviolent demonstration. Soon thereafter, police began altering their story, only serving to heighten suspicion that the police department is attempting a cover-up.

A new fact or statement has been added to the officers’ story virtually every day since the killing, which has only added to the confusion. Frequently, statements are made only to be retracted or altered later.

Harding’s mother, Denika Chatman, told the *San Francisco Examiner*, “I’m angry, and I’m hurt, and I want the truth, and I want justice to be done.” An attorney for the family, Adante Pointer, explained: “We know, based upon the Police Department’s shifting stories, conflicting statements, allegations and claims, and retractions, that the truth seems to be far from at hand.” Pointer told the *Examiner* that at least five eyewitnesses had given him an account of the shooting different from that of police.

On Wednesday, July 20, the San Francisco Police Department attempted to dispel growing public anger by holding a town-hall meeting, orchestrated with the help of

local government and media. The meeting broke down into a yelling match between a number of defiant community members and Police Chief Greg Suhr. Suhr stormed out of the room, saying that “no progress was being made.” The meeting was broken up and dispersed soon after.

Unlike the cases of Hill and Thomas, Kenneth Harding’s actions leading up to his shooting remain unclear. Nevertheless, the recent string of police shootings are examples of a larger phenomenon of increasingly aggressive police activity statewide since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008.

In 2009, a video of BART officer Johannes Mehserle shooting a young man, Oscar Grant, in the back as he lay face down in an attempt to surrender was uploaded to YouTube and instantly went “viral,” revealing to the world the type of police criminality once easily hidden by doctored crime reports and false testimony. Although Mehserle was tried and convicted for involuntary manslaughter, many workers were scandalized by the light sentence and numerous favorable rulings he received from Judge Robert Perry.

The frequent recurrence of such incidents is attributable to many factors, including the increasing hostility of police to the community—particularly the youth, homeless and mentally ill populations—and the increasingly militaristic training received by officers. Police know very well that they can beat citizens, commit perjury and even kill with virtual impunity. In the few instances they are actually caught on film or cornered by witnesses, they know that every effort will be made to shield them from accountability and prosecution.

As the economic crisis deepens millions more workers confront joblessness, homelessness, lack of health care and even food. The situation will continue to pit workers and the youth against a police force that serves and protects the economic elite and its property. This is particularly true in California’s polarized urban areas where small enclaves of wealth and luxury pepper wide swaths of extreme poverty and blight.



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