

Family of slain Texas teen condemns police shooting

Kate Randall
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Family and friends of Jaime Gonzalez Jr. reacted with anger and grief Wednesday as details began to emerge of his fatal shooting by Brownsville, Texas police earlier that day. News of the shooting has shocked this largely Latino working class community directly across the Rio Grande from Mexico.

The 15-year-old boy was shot multiple times at Cummings Middle School just after 8 a.m. Wednesday after police officers responded to calls from school administrators reporting that the eighth-grader had a gun. The weapon turned out to be an air-powered pellet gun, not a firearm.

Gonzalez was taken to Valley Baptist Medical Center, where he was pronounced dead. A judge has ordered an autopsy.

At a press conference Wednesday afternoon, Orlando Rodriguez, interim chief of the Brownsville Police Department, said that two officers fired three shots with assault rifles, hitting the young man at least twice. One of these shots struck him in the back of the head. Jaime Gonzalez Sr., the boy's father, quoted by the *Washington Post*, asked, "Why was so much excess force used on a minor? Three shots. Why not one that would bring him down?"

Gonzales Sr. and his wife Norvala were both at work at the time of the incident. "We're all suffering," he told the South Texas *Monitor*. "His mom is destroyed. She's with family right now." Norvala Gonzales, the boy's stepmother, was the only mother he had known.

According to initial reports, the younger Gonzalez had apparently gotten into a fight with another student just before school began and then began brandishing a weapon, prompting school officials to call the police. Brownsville police have so far not released the 911 call.

The police account of the sniper-style shooting sounds like the taking down of a terror suspect.

According to police radio recordings referred to by the interim police chief, police entered the school and shouted that they saw the boy with what appeared to be a firearm. A police officer yells, "Take him out!" and then the sound of fired shots reverberates on the radio call. An officer then states, "Subject shot."

The school was immediately locked down and students were held in their classrooms until police gave the all-clear. The students were eventually bused to a nearby high school and frantic parents were finally able to pick them up several hours later.

Norma Navarro, Jaime Gonzalez's godmother, spoke out against the teen's shooting Wednesday afternoon. Through tears, she said, "Both principals went to the mother a week ago and told her, 'Jaime is an excellent student. He's a great person. His grades are real good and we're all real proud of him,' So how can they come and say that he's a terrible kid?"

According to the *Monitor*, Navarro says that at the time of the shooting, Jaime's stepmother, who does not speak English, was taken to a municipal court and asked to sign paperwork. The *Monitor* reports, "At that time she [Norvala] was not yet aware that her son had been fatally shot, Navarro said. Navarro alleged that the mother was told the paperwork would release the officer involved in the shooting of any 'charges' or responsibility."

"How can he say that to a mourning mother? She still didn't know," Navarro told the media. "She said, 'No, I want to see my son,' and then they took her to the hospital to see his body." Brownsville police have not confirmed this account.

Navarro says that the boy's mother was told that her son had sustained wounds on his lower body. However, when she lifted the sheet covering him to view and then embrace his body, she found that he had a gunshot

wound to the back of his head.

The father later reported that his son had sustained three gunshot wounds: one to the shoulder, one to the rib cage, and one to the back of the head. “That’s the shot that bothers me the most,” he said, referring to the head wound.

The fact that the boy was shot in the back of the head would indicate that he was not facing the officers, and strongly suggests that he could not have been threatening the police officers, as they have claimed. The mother is demanding that the officers responsible be punished, telling the *Post*, “What happened was an injustice.”

An investigation into the fatal shooting will be conducted by the Texas Rangers, along with the Brownsville Independent School District (BISD) police. The Brownsville PD officers involved in the shooting will be placed on leave, the police department’s usual practice in such cases.

Wednesday evening, several dozen friends and classmates of the slain boy gathered outside the Gonzalez family’s home to remember their friend. The boy’s father, struggling to come to grips with the loss of his son, has said that Jaime seemed to be doing better in school lately. He was known in the neighborhood for mowing neighbors’ lawns, washing dogs and fixing other kids’ bikes.

Brownsville, population 175,000, is one of the fastest growing urban areas in the United States, with many residents working in manufacturing or at the Port of Brownsville, a major hub for South Texas. Brownsville has been touted as having one of the most “pro-business” economic climates in the US—i.e., one that exploits workers under harsh conditions for low wages.

Median income in the predominantly Latino city was \$24,468 in 2010—less than half the national average. In one indication of the poverty and social tensions confronting the Brownsville population, Jaime Gonzalez’s godmother could not afford to put his picture in the paper for his 15th birthday this past summer, but his shooting means that it will now be printed under the most tragic of circumstances.



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