

Third police killing in one week in New York City

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6 February 2012

The 18-year-old killed by police bullets in the Bronx on February 2 was the third young victim of New York City cops in the space of one week.

Ramarley Graham was shot and killed in his own apartment, after members of the Street Narcotics Enforcement Unit pursued him on the basis of a false report that he was armed. The police busted into the second floor apartment on East 229th Street where he lived with his family. The Wakefield section of the Bronx, just south of Mount Vernon in suburban Westchester County, has a large West Indian population, and Ramarley's family came from Jamaica.

He was shot at close range in the chest after he had run into his bathroom. Fatally wounded in the lung and aorta, he was pronounced dead at Montefiore Hospital. Police later reported finding a bag of marijuana in the bathroom, suggesting that he was trying to dispose of it. Graham was unarmed.

So outrageous was this latest police killing that Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who usually reflexively defend the actions of the hired defenders of "law and order," both issued quick statements of "concern." "At this juncture, we see an unarmed person being shot," said Kelly. "That always concerns us."

Demonstrators gathered outside the Graham family home hours after the shooting and denounced the police. "Murderers!" they shouted. According to one news report, someone yelled, "You killed him because he smoked weed."

A neighbor, Eulalee Robinson, told a reporter for the *New York Times*, "He was running, I heard, running into a bathroom. And they shot him. Why?"

The victim's grandmother, Patricia Hartley, was standing just feet away when the shooting took place. As the police barged into the apartment, she was heard

to shout, "Why you hitting me? Why you hitting me?" Ramarley's 6-year-old brother screamed, "They killed my brother."

Several officers involved in the shooting have been stripped of their guns and badges and reassigned to desk duty. The case is being sent to the Bronx District Attorney's office and will be referred to a grand jury, although in many such incidents claims by the police that they thought the suspect was armed are sufficient to avoid indictment.

A day after the shooting, a friend of the Graham family charged that Ms. Hartley, the victim's grandmother, was taken into custody and held for 7 hours at the police station. Carlton Berkley said that Hartley was pressured into giving a statement to the police. "She gave it against her will," he said. "She didn't want to speak to the police."

Kelly went out of his way to express concern on this development as well. "Obviously, it is a very, very traumatic situation for the grandmother," he said. "She was present when this happened, and she certainly should have been shown a sensitivity to that issue. I would hope that she was. If not...we'll certainly investigate."

The killing of Graham came only days after the police shooting of a 17-year-old in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn. On January 29, an off-duty detective on his way to work claimed that the youth tried to rob him and shot him to death.

On January 26, in another Brooklyn police killing, an off-duty officer killed a 22-year-old carjacking suspect in the Cypress Hills neighborhood.

Also last week, an officer was shot in the head in another incident, after responding to a notice of a man with a gun. The officer is expected to recover, and a suspect is facing attempted murder charges.

Commissioner Kelly, asked about the spate of killings, replied, “These things seem to come in clumps sometimes.” In the case of this “clump,” however, the growing social tensions in the city are very likely a factor. Four years after the financial collapse, the bankers and hedge fund managers are back in business but the working class, and especially its poorest sections, are bearing the brunt of the economic pain, compounded by unemployment, budget cuts and austerity policies across the board.

The police have been targeting working-class youth, particularly minority youth, for many years. A campaign against marijuana possession, the lowest level of misdemeanor charge, has resulted in over 400,000 arrests over the last decade, mostly of black and Hispanic youth. There were 50,000 arrests on the charge in 2011, the lion’s share taking place in minority working class neighborhoods. Many of these arrests are the result of the antidemocratic “stop-and-frisk” doctrine, pursuant to which individual officers for all practical purposes have the arbitrary power to “shake down” any individual without obtaining a warrant. These arrests result in permanent criminal records for many thousands of working-class youth each year.

The anger at the police is palpable and growing, not only over brutality but also on corruption and misconduct. Last year saw the arrests of 17 cops on charges of fixing traffic tickets for friends and family members, charges against other police officers in connection with gunrunning, and numerous other cases of criminal activity, including rape.

In recent years the Bloomberg administration has touted declining crime statistics, but this has not stopped it from stepping up its regular harassment and abuse of workers and youth. Even though the numbers of police shootings are reported as having dropped in recent years, the latest incidents clearly show that such trends are temporary. This month marks the 13th anniversary of the police killing of African immigrant Amadou Diallo on his Bronx doorstep, and it was only five years ago that Sean Bell was killed by 50 police bullets on his wedding day. In the Diallo case four officers were tried and acquitted. In the shooting of Sean Bell, the cops were acquitted in 2008, but the city paid \$7 million in damages to his family. (See “The Sean Bell verdict – assuring that New York City’s

police can kill with impunity,” 26 April 2008).

The latest round of shootings also takes place only weeks after the uproar over Commissioner Kelly’s appearance in an anti-Muslim film that was shown to 1,500 officers as part of their training (See “New York Mayor Bloomberg backs police commissioner in uproar over anti-Muslim film,” 30 January 2012).

More than anything, the New York City police are identified internationally with the brutal crackdown on the Occupy Wall Street protests in the fall of last year. In November, on orders from the highest levels of the corporate and political establishment, the city’s police department met popular protests against social inequality with a storm of tear gas, pepper spray, rubber bullets, military maneuvers, beatings and arbitrary mass arrests. The crackdown on Occupy Wall Street starkly exposed the social role of the police.

The repeated incidents of police violence reflect the job that the officers are assigned: that of defending social conditions that have become increasingly intolerable for broad masses of workers and youth. The responsibility for police violence rests not only with individual police officers—who are every once in a while made into scapegoats to placate public anger—but with the failed social system that individual officers are tasked with upholding.



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