

Spate of police shootings coincides with deepening social crisis in New York

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A series of deadly police shootings in New York City has taken place against the backdrop of a worsening social crisis, provoking widespread anger towards the New York Police Department (NYPD) among working class New Yorkers.

The latest shooting incident occurred on October 4 when a police detective, Hassan Hamdy, shot and killed an unarmed man after he had been pulled over for allegedly driving erratically on the Grand Central Parkway in the borough of Queens. Hamdy, a 14-year veteran assigned to the Emergency Service Unit, fired one bullet through an open window of the car, striking 22-year-old Noel Polanco in the abdomen. Polanco, a National Guardsman and a native of LeFrak City in Queens, was pronounced dead less than an hour later at a nearby hospital in Flushing.

NYPD sources initially told media outlets that as two officers approached the car, Polanco reached under his seat, prompting Hamdy to shoot him once in the stomach. No weapons were recovered from the car, but a hand drill was found under the driver's seat, police said. NYPD chief spokesman Paul Browne initially tried to make an issue of the hand drill. However, he was compelled to abandon this desperate grasp for an alibi after a passenger in the car, Diane Deferrari, described as false the initial account that Polanco had reached under the seat. "The last thing she saw was his hands on the steering wheel," Browne told *The New York Post*.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Deferrari said that just before pulling the car over, officers appeared enraged that Polanco had cut them off. She said that one of the officers stuck up his middle finger and was screaming obscenities from one of the police vehicles. "As soon as we stopped—they were rushing

the car," Deferrari said. "It was like an army." She said a group of officers swarmed the car and demanded that Polanco and his friends put their hands up. Polanco, whose hands were still on the steering wheel, was shot by Detective Hamdy before he had time to comply. "This is all a case of road rage on behalf of the NYPD—that's all this is," Deferrari told the *Times*.

Hamdy has previously been named in two lawsuits claiming police abuse. In 2001 and again in 2008, the city paid out hundreds of thousands of dollars to settle two federal civil-rights lawsuits that named Hamdy and several other officers as defendants in separate claims of police abuse.

"One lawsuit accused the officers of breaking down the door of a man's home without a warrant and assaulting him; another charged that officers repeatedly harassed a business owner," according to the *Times*.

On October 11, Queens district attorney Richard Brown met with Polanco's mother, Cecilia Reyes, and later said that the fatal shooting could be heading to a grand jury. "All I want is justice," Reyes said after the meeting. "I just want this to be done the right way. I don't want no cover-ups."

The killing of Polanco followed a series of deadly police shootings across the city. On September 25, police shot and killed 28 year-old Mohamed Bah inside his family's fifth-floor apartment in Harlem. Officers had arrived at Bah's apartment after his mother called 911 to report that he was depressed and refused to leave his room. Bah allegedly lunged at cops while holding a knife. The officers fired two Taser guns and shot a rubber bullet at him before killing him with nine point-blank shots.

In a similar incident on September 7, Walwyn Jackson was shot and killed by police inside his Springfield Gardens home. According to his relatives,

Jackson was depressed and holding a knife to his own throat when cops arrived.

Jackson's fiancée, Donna Spalding, told the *Queens Chronicle* that he had been feeling overwhelmed after being unemployed for two years and having to care for his family and a new baby. Knowing that he had been hospitalized earlier that year for depression, Jackson's grandmother called for an ambulance, but the police had arrived instead.

"She told them, 'My grandson is sick. Don't hurt him,'" Spalding recounted. The NYPD claims the officers shot Jackson after he lunged at them with a knife, but his relatives have rejected this version of the story. "Now more than a month later, the family is demanding answers and an update on the police investigation. But they say they have received neither," the *Queens Chronicle* reported on Thursday.

On October 7, hundreds of people marched from City Hall to Police Headquarters to protest against the latest rash of police shootings. The march included about 300 African immigrants who were outraged by the killing of Mohamed Bah. The demonstrators were joined by Kadiatou Diallo, mother of Amadou Diallo, who was brutally gunned down during an infamous 1999 Bronx shooting.

Just days before, Police Commissioner Ray Kelly had restored the right to carry a service firearm to Kenneth Boss, one of the cops who let loose a fusillade of 41 shots against Diallo as he was trying to get out his wallet to show them an ID. Amadou Diallo's mother and other family members said that Kelly had previously promised them that Boss would not get his gun back.

In two other high-profile police shootings in August, the police shot and killed a 51-year-old man in Times Square after he allegedly lunged at them with a knife in his hand. Also in August, two officers fatally shot an armed man who had just killed a former co-worker outside the Empire State Building. Nine bystanders were injured by bullets or ricochet fragments due to the NYPD's reckless shooting spree.

The recent spate of police shootings has coincided with the release of several reports that have shed light on the worsening social conditions in the city.

The US Census Bureau released figures late last month showing that the poverty rate in the city increased for the third straight year. The poverty rate

was 20.9 percent for 2011, up from 20.1 percent in 2010. For a single person, poverty is defined as living off less than \$11,500 annually, and for a family of four the amount is \$23,021 a year. However, public policy experts have long acknowledged that the threshold is far too low, especially in cities like New York where the cost of living is high. The Bronx continues to have the highest poverty rate in the city at just over 30 percent of residents living below the poverty line. The number of elderly New Yorkers living in poverty increased from 17.2 percent in 2010 to 19 percent in 2011.

In another example of worsening social conditions, the Regional and State Employment and Unemployment Survey for August released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics late last month showed that unemployment in New York state had just reached 9.1 percent, the highest rate of unemployment since the recession began. While the unemployment rate slightly declined in New York City last month, at 9.9 percent, it remains significantly higher than it was during the worst days of the recession in 2009.

Poverty, unemployment and the lack of affordable housing find their sharpest expression in the rise of the city's homeless population. More than 46,000 people are now seeking shelter in city shelters each night, the highest number ever recorded.

The increase in police shootings under these conditions of worsening social crisis is no coincidence. The principal task of the NYPD is to police the social chasm between the city's working class majority and Manhattan's multi-millionaires and billionaires, which has grown wider than ever.

To this end, the NYPD employs methods of "zero tolerance" and social control that saw some 683,000 people, most of them working class youth, stopped and frisked last year, and which find their sharpest expression in fatal police shootings.



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