

Killings highlight epidemic of police violence in US

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In Cleveland, Ohio on November 29, Malissa Williams and Timothy Russell, both unarmed, were killed in a hail of 137 bullets fired by 13 officers. On December 15, Chicago police shot and killed Jamaal Moore, who was unarmed, after they struck him with a police car. On August 11, police chased down and executed Darius Kennedy in broad daylight in New York City. The back-to-back killings of Manuel Diaz and Joel Acevedo on July 21 and July 22 in Anaheim, California prompted angry protests and a police crackdown in which nine people were arrested.

These recent shootings are particularly savage examples of a broader social trend. Largely hidden from public view, police kill an average of between one and two people in America every day. Since the Cleveland, Ohio shootings on November 29, at least 14 people have been confirmed killed by the police in the US.

In Brunswick, Ohio on December 1, a police SWAT team surrounded the house of a man who had threatened to hurt his ex-girlfriend. After a 30-hour standoff, the man was shot multiple times and died. In Sasabe, Arizona on December 2, a border patrol agent fatally shot an undocumented immigrant attempting to cross the border after a physical altercation. The list goes on.

Across the country, sections of the working class confront mounting state violence and repression from increasingly militarized police forces. The behavior of the police in the US more and more reflects, in various ways, the murder and mayhem visited by the US military on populations in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa.

The United States is a country where remote drone pilots routinely destroy vehicles and buildings full of people far from any battlefield with the push of a button, referring to the victims as “bug splats.” These “targeted killings” are not taking place in a vacuum. They are bound up with social relations within the US. Under circumstances where the national government has openly carried out thousands of extra-judicial killings in recent years, it should come as no surprise that a culture of impunity and indifference to democratic rights has developed among the local police forces.

Among those sections of the mainstream US media that do not present even the most egregious police shootings as entirely

justified, the criticisms are inevitably framed in terms of a few “bad apples,” “rogue officers,” “racist cops,” and so on. On the contrary, the participation of some 13 officers in the Cleveland, Ohio shooting, which had all the markings of a military combat operation, points to a far more grave situation.

Comprehensive statistics on police violence in the US are not available, as the national statistics bureaus are under special instructions not to compile them (while statistics on the most obscure criminological categories are reported in great detail). However, the available evidence points to a sharp rise in police violence, not just in terms of the number of incidents, but also in terms of their brutality.

The FBI does release annual statistics for a category entitled “justifiable homicide by weapon, law enforcement,” defined as “the killing of a felon by a law enforcement officer in the line of duty.” This figure remained around 400 per year from 2007 to 2011. The number of such killings so far in 2012 is estimated at 525 or more.

The FBI’s “justifiable homicide” statistics far understate the true scale of violence. For example, these statistics do not include many deaths from tasers, restraint, or beatings, particularly inside the massive US prison system, as coroners often attribute such deaths to “natural causes” or “excited delirium” on the part of the victim, instead of homicide.

Many police departments are known to underreport their “justifiable homicides” to the FBI. For example, the Los Angeles Police Department was compelled to admit in a lawsuit that there were 79 fatal police shootings from 2000 to 2005, while it had reported only 38. Naturally, the FBI statistics also do not account for episodes of police violence in which the individual survives, even if the person sustains permanent disfiguring or disabling injuries.

Despite their limitations, the FBI statistics point to a number of disturbing trends. In 2007, police committed 19 “justifiable homicides” with rifles (military hardware increasingly coming into use by local police forces); in 2011, the FBI reported 33 such killings with rifles.

To take the example of one major US city, Los Angeles police were involved in 63 shootings in 2011, a 50 percent increase over any of the previous four years, according to the Los Angeles Police Commission. Falsified police reports of so-

called “officer-involved shootings” are part of the norm. An investigation last year by a government oversight entity in Los Angeles found that, of the shootings in which the police reported that they fired in “self-defense” because the person was “reaching for his waistband,” more than half of those shot were actually unarmed.

The same report noted a rise in the number of unarmed individuals shot by the police. “One-fifth of all suspects hit over the past six years were unarmed—in 2010, the rate was more than one-third.”

Over the past decade, particularly since the events of September 11, 2001 and under the banner of the “war on terror,” civilian police departments have been increasingly militarized and integrated into a national police infrastructure.

Historically, the United States has never had a national police force. At the time of the American Revolution, the new country had virtually no police institutions at all. Law enforcement, such as it was, was carried out according to local custom, with many areas retaining the militia system inherited from colonial governance. Meanwhile, there was no standing army, and the Constitution as well as common law legal principles prohibited the deployment of troops against the civilian population.

Police departments were introduced piecemeal in the 19th and early 20th century on a city-by-city, town-by-town basis, resulting in the arcane system of state, city, county, municipal, and local police jurisdictions that persists today. At the time of their introduction, these police departments were often opposed on the grounds that an armed police force posed a threat to democratic rights.

The absence of a national police force, from the standpoint of the American bourgeoisie, has long been considered an obstacle to carrying out systemic repression against the American population in the event of social upheavals. Accordingly, various efforts were made in the 20th century to regulate and integrate the myriad state and local departments, as well as to strengthen the police role of the federal intelligence agencies.

The past decade has witnessed extremely sharp shifts in this framework. In particular, the so-called Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which was created after the September 11, 2001 events, has emerged as the principal vehicle for the integration of local police forces into the national framework. Last year, the budget of DHS swelled to \$98.8 billion.

Over the past decade, through a program called the Urban Areas Security Initiative, the Department of Homeland Security has funneled \$7.1 billion in grants to local police departments. These resources have gone towards providing local departments with military hardware, including tanks and armored vehicles, spying facilities and technology, access to national databases and infrastructure, and equipment for use against political protests.

While nominally for the purpose of combating “terrorism,” the real purpose behind these grants is to enlist and equip local

police departments in the suppression of future social upheavals. In 2009, for example, the Pittsburgh police deployed a DHS-funded military “Long Range Acoustic Device” (LRAD), developed for wartime use in the Middle East, against G-20 protesters. One bystander suffered permanent hearing loss.

A recently released Senate oversight report, available here, documents many of the DHS Urban Areas Security Initiative expenditures.

The Department of Homeland Security is also in the process of making military drones available to local police departments, both through loans of the larger drones or through \$4 million direct grants to purchase the smaller drones, according to a recent report in the *Washington Times*. At first introduced under the pretext of “border protection,” a recent lawsuit by the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC) contends that the drones are now being secretly used for a wide range of domestic spying purposes.

At annual “National Homeland Security” conferences, slated to take place next in Los Angeles in 2013, the implementation of federally funded “homeland security” programs through local law enforcement agencies is discussed. The conference web site proclaims that, “homeland security begins with hometown security.” The web site features a welcome to vendors and participants from Los Angeles County Sheriff Leroy Baca, who sits on the Department of Homeland Security Homeland Security Advisory Council and presides over a police department with a budget of \$2.5 billion.

At last year’s National Homeland Security Conference, a discussion was held on “Occupy the Port.” The conference web site provides a synopsis of the presentation: “Law enforcement agencies increasingly face challenges when an exercise of First Amendment rights develops into a law-and-order conflict. If a protest event occurs at a port, the further challenges are to avoid adverse effects on maritime commerce and maintain security of critical port infrastructure. Ensuring safe and effective flow of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, as well as vessel movement, can also be a problem.”

The integration of local police forces into the national military-industrial complex, coinciding with the rising incidence of police violence, should be taken as a serious warning to the working class.



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