

# Miami teenager tased to death by police

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Israel Hernández-Llach, 18, collapsed and died Tuesday after five Miami Beach, Florida, police officers chased and cornered him, and one then fired a taser into his chest. His alleged crime was painting graffiti on the wall of an abandoned McDonald's restaurant.

Hernández, whose family recently immigrated from Colombia, had received acclaim in Florida art circles as a sculptor, painter, writer, and photographer inspired by his experiences in Colombia as well as the United States. Using the moniker "Reefa," Hernández painted colorful murals on the sides of abandoned buildings, an activity the police and some property owners consider vandalism.

Thiago Souza, a companion of Hernández who witnessed the killing, described the officers as patting each other on the back and "high-fiving" after the young man collapsed on the ground. "You should have seen how funny it was when his butt clenched when he got tased," Souza quoted one officer as saying to him, adding, "It was almost like they were proud of what they did."

When the officers finally noticed that the youth was in distress, an emergency team was called. The paramedics attempted to defibrillate Hernández, but he had gone too long without CPR. The teen was transported by Miami Beach Fire Rescue to Mount Sinai Hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

Hernández, who stood 5 feet, 6 inches tall and weighed only 150 pounds, posed no threat to five police officers. Tracy West, a parent who knew Hernández well, however, said that the police had warned "that if they caught him again they would beat the shit out of him."

According to Miami Beach Police Chief Raymond Martinez, Officer Jorge Mercado was "forced" to tase Hernández to avoid a "physical incident." The taser was fired directly into the young man's chest despite

recent warnings from the manufacturer, TASER International, Inc., that chest shots increase the risk of cardiac arrest and death, especially with thin people.

Most media reporting has uncritically echoed claims by the Miami Beach Police Department and TASER International that the electrical weapon is "nonlethal" and that the hundreds of deaths following taser use are due to pre-existing medical conditions or drug use, and not the taser.

The WSWS spoke to California attorney John Burton, who has successfully sued TASER International for cardiac sudden deaths following chest shots. According to Burton, the open disdain of the company and police departments for the risks posed by taser shots to the chest are part of a wider pattern of police violence and culture directed against the working class.

"It's simply idiotic to think that young people such as Israel Hernández die for some other reason at the precise moment the taser current is flowing near their heart, but that is exactly what TASER International and its police agency customers claim," Burton stated.

According to Burton, Douglas P. Zipes, MD, one of the world's foremost experts on the heart's electrical system, last year published a report in *Circulation*, the journal of the American Heart Association, of eight cardiac arrests caused by tasers.

"While TASER International responded to the growing death toll by issuing a weak 'product warning' about the cardiac risks of chest shots, its training does nothing to counter the extensive police firearm training to aim at 'center mass'—the most effective place for a bullet, but the most dangerous for a taser dart," Burton explained.

"In order for TASER International to keep selling products, police departments must keep tasing people," Burton continued. "The company tells police departments that the device has no cardiac risk and that the recent training to aim away from the chest is just for

‘risk management’ because of ‘greedy lawyers,’” Burton said.

“This case is very similar to one I am handling for a Detroit area family,” Burton added. “On April 10, 2008, a City of Warren police officer tased 16-year-old Robert Mitchell, who had run away and hid in an abandoned building. The darts landed over his heart, and he died immediately from cardiac arrest.

“The pattern I see in these cases is police using the supposedly non-lethal but very painful taser for ‘curbside justice.’” The police want the youth to be scared of them. They want to show that there are ramifications for running away. Of course, when a tragedy like this one occurs, they have to come up with false justifications for their actions,” Burton concluded.

Amnesty International reported in 2012 that more than 500 people have died in the United States following taser exposures since TASER International introduced the current generation of high-power devices in 2001. However, that number is likely too low as there is no national registry for taser deaths or even for police killings in general. Numbers have to be culled from press reports that are often incomplete or factually wrong.

Following Hernández’s autopsy, the medical examiner announced there would be no determination of the cause of death while tests remain pending.

On Wednesday evening, friends and family gathered at the Hernández family’s apartment to mourn their loss. They arranged several of the young man’s drawings, sculptures, and awards on a table, tearfully honoring his legacy. Hernández’s 21-year-old sister, Offir, told reporters that Israel “wanted to change the world somehow through art.”

Herb Kelly, one of Hernández’s art teachers at Miami Beach High, told reporters that “it was an honor to work with him. He was cutting edge. He had such awesome potential. To lose his life the way he did is tragic.”

Hernández’s latest project was marketing a new line of skateboards named “Tropical” which featured his artwork.

“Those guilty of this must be brought to justice,” declared Israel Hernández Bandera, the youth’s grieving father. “Not even animals deserve that kind of treatment.”

The Miami Beach Police Department, like others

throughout the United States, has a history of violence directed against the working class, particularly youth. Mercado, the officer who tased Hernández, has had six complaints filed against him for excessive force and other violations, one leading to a 2011 suspension of 160 hours. During Memorial Day weekend in 2011, eight Miami Beach officers fired more than 100 bullets at an intoxicated motorist who was driving recklessly. The motorist was killed and four bystanders were wounded. The case is still unresolved two years later.



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