LAPD officers ignored pleas from dying asthmatic arrestee

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In September of 2013, Los Angeles police arrested 26-year-old Jorge Azucena after he drove through a red light and led them on a short pursuit. Details of the incident are included in a recently released report by the Los Angeles Police Commission.

While on their way to a Southwest Los Angeles police station, Azucena had an asthma attack and told officers he could not breathe. According to camera footage from inside the patrol car that was recently released following an internal investigation, Azucena yelled out, “Help me, help me, I can’t breathe.” The officers mainly ignored him, and at one point an officer told the dying man, “You can breathe just fine. You can talk, so you can breathe.”

After arriving at the police station, Azucena collapsed while exiting the patrol car. One of the officers reportedly said, “You need to get up like a man and walk.” One of the officers later claimed that Azucena appeared to be “walking wobbly” and seemed “fatigued.”

As part of the initial screening procedure at the station, arrestees are asked about their health. Azucena could not verbally respond to officers’ questions at this point. Although he was sweating profusely and displaying obvious signs of a medical crisis, the officers claimed that Azucena’s failure to respond to the screening meant that he was in good health.

Azucena was then placed face down in a holding cell. While in the cell he yelled out again, “Help me, help me, help me. I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe. Help me, please.”

Azucena was then placed in the back of a patrol car after a sergeant told officers he was trying to “incite” other prisoners. After being placed in the car, Azucena kicked at the car door and yelled to officers outside that he could not breathe.

After being driven to another station and placed in a holding cell, officers discovered that he was not breathing. Paramedics arrived 40 minutes later and unsuccessfully attempted to revive him. Azucena was declared dead upon arrival at the hospital. A county coroner later declared that he died as a result of an asthma attack.

When he did not arrive home the following morning, Azucena’s mother and girlfriend visited several police stations to ascertain his whereabouts. The Southwest LAPD station where he had been kept told them that they had not booked anyone under that name nor did they have any “John Does” in custody the night of his apparent disappearance.

Only three days later did police reveal to the family what actually happened.

As in virtually all such cases, none of the police officers involved have been criminally prosecuted.

The heavily redacted report released by the Los Angeles Police Commission, after making repeated references to “known gang activity in the area,” admitted that Azucena was in agony before he died. While it noted the apparent indifference to his suffering on the part of numerous officers and staff involved, the report concluded that the incident should not be considered an example of systematic brutality being carried out by the LAPD or its Southwest division.

“I don’t think this points to a culture of officers who don’t care about people,” said Steve Soboroff, the commission president. Azucena leaves behind a one-year-old son.

The Los Angeles Police Department, like its counterparts across the country, systematically metes out brutality to the population with impunity. The treatment received by Azucena is only one case among many.

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To cite only a few examples from the Los Angeles area, a year before Azucena's arrest, 35-year-old Alesia Thomas died after a beating she received at the hands of LAPD officer Mary O'Callaghan. O'Callaghan, a former US Marine, repeatedly kicked the unarmed, hobbled young woman in the stomach and groin. Although Thomas died as a result of the beating, O'Callaghan is merely being prosecuted for assault.

On August 11, Los Angeles police murdered Ezell Ford, an unarmed, mentally disabled young man. Despite protests and repeated calls by the family for justice, the names of the officers involved have not been revealed and they have received no disciplinary action. Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti promised that a full and fair investigation into the incident would be launched, but no such action has been made public since.

In December of last year, LAPD officers fired as many as 21 shots at Brian Beaird, an unarmed, disabled veteran, while he was stumbling away from his car after a vehicle pursuit. The entire incident was broadcast on live television.

In July, a California Highway Patrol (CHP) officer was filmed repeatedly pummeling a 51-year-old woman in the head in the median of a Los Angeles freeway. After a series of brutal blows, another CHP officer arrived on the scene. Rather than restrain the first officer, the second held down the woman, later identified as Marlene Pinnock, to assist in the beating. Pinnock luckily survived the assault and is suing the CHP for damages.

The CHP nearly beat a truck driver to death in the Los Angeles area in 2011 after the driver asked to read his traffic ticket before signing it. The CHP has also recently been compelled to pay a $250,000 settlement to a pregnant woman who was kneed in the stomach and hogtied by officers after she was seen talking on a cell phone while driving.

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