

Class and race in US police killings: A further comment

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The police killing of Michael Brown and the resulting mass protests in Ferguson, Missouri have exposed to the world the great social divide that exists in America. Moreover, the government's militarized response to the exercise by the people of Ferguson of their constitutional right to protest has shredded the façade of bourgeois democracy, revealing for all to see the emerging American police state.

As the class division separating the financial aristocracy from the broad masses of people has become readily apparent to tens of millions of people, the big business media and its accomplices in the pseudo-left have been called upon once again to promote and utilize racial politics in an attempt to obscure and divert public attention from the fundamental issues of class, poverty and social inequality.

In a perspective column last week, "Class, race and the police killing in Ferguson, Missouri," the *World Socialist Web Site* replied to one such invocation of racial politics, a column by Dave Zirin that appeared on the web site of the International Socialist Organization. He claimed, "Michael Brown was shot dead by the police because he is Black. If he were white, no matter how poor, he almost certainly wouldn't have died. If that is not your starting point, then you are lost without a compass."

A similar commentary appeared August 18 under the byline of Eugene Robinson, a columnist for the *Washington Post*. After citing the examples of Trayvon Martin in Florida, Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York, and Michael Brown, he writes, "This story line is unassailable. Anyone who thinks race is not a factor in these fatal encounters should have to cite examples of unarmed, young, white men being killed by trigger-happy police or self-appointed vigilantes. Names and dates, please."

Robinson poses this question as though it was an unanswerable argument proving that race is the primary

factor in police murders. Tragically, however, the "names and dates" of young white men and women murdered by police are all too easy to supply. The WSWs has reported at least five such killings this year alone:

* January 5, 2014: Keith Vidal, age 18, Boiling Springs Lake, North Carolina

* March 16, 2014: James Boyd, age 30, Albuquerque, New Mexico

* March 26, 2014: Steven Corkery, age 30, Spokane, Washington

* April 21, 2014: Mary Hawkes, age 19, Albuquerque, New Mexico

* April 27, 2014: Jason Conoscenti, age 36, Long Beach, California

All five were young and poor, like their African-American counterparts. Three suffered from some form of mental illness. The two Albuquerque victims were allegedly "armed," according to the police, but Boyd, homeless and mentally ill, merely picked up a knife when surrounded by a half dozen heavily armed police accompanied by attack dogs. The cops claim Mary Hawkes had a gun, but their body video cameras were inexplicably turned off during the confrontation that led to her death, and the gun found could easily have been a police "throw-down."

As a corollary to their promotion of racial politics, the pseudo-left and the corporate media conceal the reality that working class whites, as the majority in the population, also comprise the majority of victims of police violence. They have been able to do this in part because of the conscious policy of the government to suppress information and data on police killings.

In an era when police agencies at all levels compile and release precise and detailed statistics as to crime rates, types of crimes committed, locations of crimes and so forth, there exists no credible state or national database on excessive use of force by police. This is despite the

passage in 1994 of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, which instructs the attorney general to “acquire data about the use of excessive force by law enforcement officers” and to “publish an annual summary of the data acquired.” Yet 20 years after the passage of this law, no such data exists.

The best available source of data on police killings is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which keeps data on deaths that occur throughout the country. One of its death categories is homicides by “legal intervention,” a term that covers any situation where a person dies at the hands of anyone authorized to use deadly force in the line of duty. This category consists of all sworn police officers, as distinguished from private security guards.

From 1999 to 2011, this category totals over 5,000 deaths. In several of these years, the total number of deaths at the hands of the police in the United States exceeded the deaths in combat of US soldiers in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Over this span of more than a decade, 3,596 whites died compared to 1,463 blacks.

Though this data shows that many more whites have been killed by the police than blacks, it also indicates that a disproportionate number of blacks have been victims of police violence. Certainly police racism is a contributing factor in this disproportionality, but even here it is not the primary factor.

According to Candace McCoy, a criminologist at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice at the City University of New York, income has more to do with this disparity than race. Violent encounters with police most frequently occur in connection with felony crimes, she said—or at least, allegations of such crimes. “Felony crime is highly correlated with poverty,” she noted, and the felony rates for poor whites and for poor blacks are similar.

If one’s only news source were the ISO’s *Socialist Worker*, one would be unaware that the police have ever killed anyone who was white. The ISO publication did not mention any of the above-mentioned police killings reported in the WWSWS this year.

The spate of police killings in Albuquerque, 23 since 2010 in a city of a half million, drew national media attention, including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the television networks, as well as a federal investigation. The video of James Boyd’s shooting in Albuquerque was viewed by more than a half million people. But there was no mention of these events in the

Socialist Worker.

Because of the extraordinarily high number of officer-involved shootings, the city of Albuquerque in 2011 retained the services of the Washington, DC-based Police Executive Research Forum to examine, for the period of 2006-2010, 37 officer-involved shootings which had resulted in 18 deaths.

Its findings included the following:

- The race of subjects: 57 percent were Hispanic, 27 percent were White, 3 percent were African American, 3 percent were Native American, 3 percent were Asian and the race of 8 percent was not known.

- 54 percent of subjects had a confirmed prior history of mental illness.

- The age of subjects: 16 percent were 18-20 years, 32 percent were 21-30 years, 19 percent were 31-40, 27 percent were 41-50 years, and 5 percent were over 50 years.

Thus, almost half of the victims were under 30, and over half suffered from mental illness. It is likely that subsequent victims of police violence in Albuquerque, from 2011 to the present, showed the same demographics.

The denial of police violence against white workers and youth is aimed at separating police repression and violence from its fundamental class character by elevating race as the primary factor in society. This actually promotes racism by sowing divisions within the working class. The proponents of identity politics then attempt to channel the justifiable anger and frustration felt by masses of people back into the safe confines of the Democratic Party and the defense of the capitalistic system.

In contrast to this reactionary ideology, socialists have never denied or ignored the existence of racism. However, we maintain that the struggle against racism and all forms of oppression must be based on the fight to unite all workers, on the basis of their common class interests, against the capitalist system.

To do otherwise serves to obscure the more fundamental source of oppression of workers and youth of all races, colors, ethnicities, etc.—the exploitation of the working class—and the real driving force of history—the class struggle.



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