

Notes on police violence in America

“Justifiable homicides” by police at record high

Tom Hall

27 November 2014

FBI data released over the past month reveals that so-called “justifiable homicides” reached a record high last year, while the number of officers killed in the line of duty fell to its lowest level in decades.

According to the data, which appeared in a Monday article on the *Washington Post* web site, 461 American civilians were killed by on-the-job police officers in 2013, while 27 police officers were killed by civilians.

The article notes the correlation between the record killings and the militarization of American police over the same period, “fueled by a glut of surplus military equipment heading home from Iraq and Afghanistan.” The FBI’s “justifiable homicide” figures increase steadily around 1998, the year after the start of the US Government’s Defense Logistics Agency’s 1033 program, which parcels out surplus military equipment to state and local police.

The FBI figures for “justifiable homicide,” defined by the agency as “the killing of a felon by a law enforcement officer in the line of duty,” is widely acknowledged to be an undercount, according to the *Post*, because the methodology is not uniform from state to state. There are no comprehensive nationwide statistics on police brutality, despite the government being required to do so by the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act passed in 1994. However, a Facebook page titled “Killed by Police,” which posts links to news stories on police killings, has counted more than 1,450 killings by police officers since its launch on May 1, 2013.

Los Angeles police kill two more over replica weapon

Sheriff’s deputies in Los Angeles gunned down Eduardo Bermundez, 26, and Ricardo Avelar-Lara, 57,

early in the morning of Sunday, November 16, after Bermundez was alleged to have threatened someone with a handgun that later turned out to be a replica.

This was at least the fourth police murder this year involving a person holding a toy or replica weapon. It follows the deaths of John Crawford III for carrying a pellet gun and Darrien Hunt for carrying a replica samurai sword. Only a week ago, police killed 12-year-old Tamir Rice on a Cleveland playground for carrying a toy pistol.

An eyewitness claimed that at around 2:20 AM Bermundez and Avelar-Lara pulled up alongside his car in an East Los Angeles parking lot and pointed the “weapon,” a replica .45 caliber handgun, at him. The eyewitness tailed their car while calling 911, eventually flagging down a sheriff’s patrol vehicle.

Deputies pulled the car over in a nearby apartment complex, where according to the police report Bermundez “started to pull a handgun out of his pants and point it in the direction of the deputies.” Police immediately opened fire, killing both Bermundez and Avelar-Lara, who was standing behind him. They were pronounced dead at the scene one minute later at 2:40 AM, twenty minutes from the first alleged incident.

Bermundez had been at his 3 year-old nephew’s birthday party the previous afternoon not far from where he was murdered, according to relatives. “It’s just hard to imagine that from one day to another he’s gone,” Bermundez’s cousin told the local ABC affiliate. “He was always a happy guy.”

NYPD beating of subway turnstile jumper captured on video

A New York police officer was caught on video Thursday night beating a black youth in the head with

his baton for attempting to enter a Brooklyn subway station without paying the \$2.50 fare.

The video shows the officer, who is also black, striking 20-year-old Donovan Lawson twice, first in the leg and then on the crown of his head, causing extensive bleeding. Striking a suspect in the head with a baton is against official NYPD policy. Lawson then stumbles through the station with the officer on his back before finally being pinned against a wall and handcuffed by four officers while his horrified girlfriend looks on.

In the video Lawson's forehead bleeds so profusely that his girlfriend is drenched in his blood by the time the officers are able to pull her away. The eyewitness who shot the video on his cell phone said that before the video began Lawson had been pepper-sprayed, which was confirmed by the police.

Lawson, who had no criminal record prior to his arrest last week, was charged with fare beating, resisting arrest, disorderly conduct and disrupting government administration. He later received treatment for cuts to his head at Woodhull Hospital. The officer was taken to Wyckoff Heights Hospital, where he was treated for injuries to his arm and hand.

New Jersey cops kill schizophrenic man during welfare check

Police in Phillipsburg, New Jersey killed Thomas Read, a 36-year old schizophrenic man, after his mother asked them to monitor him during an episode. Read was wielding a knife and “refused to comply with police orders,” according to the police.

Read had run out of his medication due to problems with his medical insurance, according to his mother Anne Read. According to family friend Joel Andreano, who told the *Express-Times* newspaper, “He was talking about flaming swords and stuff,” when he called him on Thursday. “He obviously was delusional. I called [his mother back] back and told her, ‘No, I don’t think he’s doing good.’ She should call the police.”

Police checked up on Read the following Friday without incident, according to Andreano, who told *The Express-Times* that Read seemed “calm, happy” when he met with him later that day.

The following Monday, police conducted another welfare check at Reid’s apartment, after his neighbor expressed concerns about threatening letters and a knife

stuck to Reid’s front door, according to Andreano. Police found Read in his house when they arrived, and talked to him through his window, according to footage shown to *The Express-Times*. Read hurled an “unknown object” through an opening in the window at police, who responded by breaking the window and unsuccessfully attempting to climb through to get at Read. Police entered the house through a back entrance, according to residents, who reported that they heard “four or five” gunshots.

Andreano expressed his dismay at the police’s handling of the situation. “He needed help ... He needed to get to the hospital because he didn’t have his medicine.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact