

New York police gun down mentally unstable man in midtown Manhattan

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20 May 2016

The morning commute in Manhattan's bustling theater district came to a terrifying halt Wednesday as nine New York Police Department (NYPD) gunshots ripped through a busy intersection packed with tourists and residents. When the smoke cleared, a 46-year-old man lay face down in the middle of the intersection, his hands cuffed behind his back. Two trails of blood streamed down the pavement away from his lifeless body. Ambulance workers soon arrived to tend to another victim, a woman on a business trip from California. She was loaded onto a stretcher and rushed to a local hospital.

Garry Conrad, an Upper Manhattan resident and underemployed theater stagehand, became the latest in a long tally of those killed by police. Nationwide, police killed more than 1,100 last year alone, according to a count by the Guardian. That number of victims due to the violence of the NYPD in the last 15 years is approaching 200.

Wednesday's killing began as a common instance of drunken and disorderly behavior. Conrad attempted to buy a six-pack of beer at a supermarket on 49th Street and Eighth Avenue, but was ejected from the store for unruly and offensive outbursts.

Conrad had a history of alcohol problems and was believed to be homeless. A fellow stagehand described him to the New York Daily News as "soft-spoken and gentle," but after he suffered a head injury during a mugging several years ago developed "anger issues."

A witness to the commotion in the supermarket alerted a nearby police officer, on duty to monitor picket lines of striking Verizon workers.

Outside the store, the officer responded to an aggravated Conrad by grabbing his backpack from behind and wrestling the man to the ground. As Conrad returned to his feet, he took out an eight-inch knife.

NYPD Chief James O'Neill told the press that Conrad refused orders to drop the knife and continued approaching the officer, knife in hand. Two other officers on the scene reacted by unloading a storm of bullets, fatally wounding the victim.

One of the police bullets struck the female passerby in the arm. Police officials presented her gunshot wound as minor, but she was taken to Bellevue Hospital for treatment.

Wednesday's incident was far from unique. Several times over the past few years NYPD officers shocked crowds on Manhattan streets by opening fire in broad daylight, often targeting mentally disturbed individuals.

Nearly a year ago officers shot and killed a 30-year-old schizophrenic man carrying a hammer just 12 blocks south on Eighth Avenue. In 2013 police wounded 11 bystanders and killed two mentally ill men in three separate shootings, all in high-traffic areas of Midtown Manhattan.

NYPD spokesmen and media outlets rushed to declare Wednesday's killing as justified on the grounds of self-defense. There was no accounting for whether the aggressiveness of the officers escalated what may have otherwise been peacefully resolved, no hand-wringing over wounding an innocent onlooker and no concern over unleashing such brutal violence in full public view. New York City's Democratic mayor Bill de Blasio did not even feel compelled to issue a statement. As far as city leaders are concerned, this is routine business, there cannot and will not be any changes to the NYPD's practice of "shoot first, ask questions later."

The treatment of New York City's mentally ill is particularly severe. With grossly inadequate mental health services to provide care for those in need, mental breakdowns are typically treated as criminal matters,

with all the violence that entails. Unstable individuals are frequently hauled off in body bags and left to rot in hellish conditions in the city's notorious Riker's Island jail. An estimated 40 percent of the 11,000 inmates there are considered to have some form of mental illness.

The license of the police to kill with impunity, in New York as elsewhere throughout the country, is bound up with intensifying class tensions. The unconstrained buildup of police forces has been overseen by the Obama administration, which supplies local police forces with military-grade weaponry recycled from decades of war in the Middle East.

In New York City, reliance on police forces to keep a check on historic and ever-growing levels of inequality has taken the form of mayor de Blasio's support for "broken windows" policing, which emphasizes the prosecution of petty violations as a supposed deterrent for more serious crime. Despite the decreasing reliance on "stop and frisk" techniques used by the previous administration, the police brutality remains an essential and daily feature of class rule.



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