

Police violence in Los Angeles continues unabated

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12 August 2016

Within the space of two weeks police in the Los Angeles area have shot and killed three people, including a 14-year-old youth engaged in graffiti, an unarmed man mistaken for a carjacker and an unarmed homeless man on a bicycle.

According to the *Guardian*, which has been tracking police killings, Los Angeles led the nation last year with 19 police killings. This number, however, only refers to those committed by the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). This number doubles when taking into account police killings committed by other police agencies within Los Angeles County, which encompasses the Sheriff's Department and over 40 municipal police departments in independent cities such as Long Beach, Inglewood and Pasadena.

In the most recent police shooting on August 9, 14-year-old Jesse Romero was shot and killed by an LAPD officer in East Los Angeles, a poor, largely Hispanic working class community. The police claim that Romero was suspected of writing gang-style graffiti in the area before he bolted from officers and then fired a gun at them.

The *Los Angeles Times*, however, interviewed a woman who said she witnessed the shooting and who would only identify herself by her first name, Norma. This witness described to the *Times* how she was in a car stopped at a traffic light at Cesar Chavez and Breed Street when she saw someone running from Chicago Street. He was pulling up his basketball shorts, which appeared to be falling down, she said.

As the runner turned onto Breed Street, he pulled a handgun from his waistband and threw it toward a fence, the witness said. The gun hit the fence and fell onto the ground, and she heard the weapon fire.

At that moment, she said, the runner turned around and appeared startled. She heard two more gunshots and the runner fell to the ground. Moments later, officers placed handcuffs on him, she said.

"He didn't shoot," the woman said of the runner.

According to an LAPD spokesperson, the officers involved were wearing body cameras and investigators were still reviewing videos, which will be compared with other evidence, including witness and officer statements.

The ACLU of Southern California released a statement saying it was "particularly concerned" by the killing and argued that the LAPD should change its body camera policy so that recordings are made public.

"Under current policy, LAPD will show the body camera footage to the officers involved before they make an initial statement, allowing them to tailor accounts to the details they see on video," wrote the group's executive director, Hector Villagra. "At the same time, LAPD will keep the video secret from the public."

According to the *Guardian*, Jesse Romero was the 13th LAPD victim this year and the 25th person killed by the police within Los Angeles County this year.

In another police killing on August 2, William Bowers, a 51 year-old homeless man, was riding his bicycle in Castaic, a city just north of Los Angeles, when Los Angeles County Sheriff deputies tried to stop him. As the unarmed Bowers dropped his bicycle and fled on foot, a deputy opened fire, fatally striking him in the torso. The sheriff's claim Bowers was reaching for his waistband when he was shot.

Deputies initially tried to detain Bowers because they recognized him from previous interactions and knew he was on probation for a narcotics conviction, detectives said.

According to sheriff spokesperson, Lt. Joe Mendoza, investigators were still waiting to obtain the deputy's explanation for why deadly force was used during the encounter.

"We don't know why the deputy did what he did at this point because he has yet to be interviewed," Mendoza told the *Los Angeles Times*. "No weapons were recovered

at the shooting scene.”

Detectives, however, have interviewed several witnesses and most said Bowers had his hands near his waistband, according to Mendoza. Movement toward a waistband is often cited by police officers as a sign that a person is reaching for a gun in order to claim a shooting was justified.

“We have a witness who says the man’s arms were at his sides. We have other witnesses who say his hands were in front of his waistband,” Mendoza said. “The deputy had the best view.”

One witness told KTLA-TV Channel 5 that the man was running from deputies when he was shot.

“He jumped off his bike and started running, and the cop shot him,” the man told the news station.

Another recent shooting victim, Donnell Thompson, an unarmed 27-year-old man, was shot to death by a Los Angeles County Sheriff’s deputy last month in Compton, California. The sheriff’s department had originally identified Thompson as a suspect in a carjacking, but now concedes he was an innocent man who had no involvement in a carjacking.

“We have determined that there is no evidence that Mr. Thompson was in the carjacked vehicle, nor that he was involved in the assault on the deputies,” Los Angeles Sheriff Department (LASD) said in a statement Tuesday.

In the early morning hours of July 28, Thompson, who is black, was shot and killed by an LASD deputy following a carjacking in which a suspect crashed a stolen car in a Compton neighborhood and fired on sheriff’s deputies. Following a search, the carjacking suspect was arrested.

Shortly after that arrest, however, sheriff’s deputies responded to a 911 call in the same neighborhood by a resident who found Thompson lying in his yard. LASD deputies believed Thompson to be a second suspect in the carjacking incident.

Sheriff’s officials have claimed that Thompson was in a position on the ground that concealed his hands and that they thought he might have been armed. They also say he did not respond to their commands and that at one point he stood up and “charged at the deputies.”

That’s when a deputy shot and killed Thompson from the turret of an armored vehicle. No weapons were recovered in the incident.

Brian Dunn, an attorney representing the Thompson family, said that it was a series of “tactical blunders” by LASD that led to the shooting, one that was clearly a “mistake.”

“We’ve done our own investigation and have not heard anything to suggest that Donnell Thompson was in any way acting in an aggressive manner or in any way demonstrating that he posed a threat to anyone,” Dunn told the *Huffington Post*.

“He hadn’t committed a crime, he was not wanted, he had not done anything wrong, he was legally authorized to be where he was, he was legally authorized to be doing what he was doing, he wasn’t breaking the law and he wasn’t armed—when you take that backdrop of facts it’s just not only a tragedy, but it’s a homicide, in every sense of the word.”

Dunn was also critical of the sheriff’s use of an armored vehicle in this situation.

“In a civilian neighborhood, they bring an urban assault vehicle,” Dunn said, “the BearCat, it’s like a tank. Their response to this situation was so aggressive. Their tactics were so aggressive.”

Dunn said he has filed a federal civil rights claim against the county and that a lawsuit is forthcoming.

“Knowing what we know now, do we wish it hadn’t happened?” LASD Capt. Steven Katz said at a news conference. “It speaks for itself.” Katz, however, declined to describe the shooting of Thompson as a mistake, or as an unjustified or unlawful killing.

Family members described Thompson, who had no criminal record and went by the nickname Little Bo Peep, as gentle and shy. He attended classes for the mentally disabled at El Camino College’s Compton Center. His oldest sister, Matrice Stanley, said that “his age was 27, but mentally ... he was probably 16.”

The LASD said that the deputy who killed Thompson, who has not been identified, has been reassigned to non-field duties. An investigation into the shooting is ongoing.



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