

Notes on police violence

Rare conviction, resignation of officers for police killings in Louisiana and New York City

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The forced resignation of New York police officer, Richard Haste, this week over the killing of an unarmed teenager in 2012, and the conviction of Marksville, Louisiana deputy marshal, Derrick Stafford, charged with manslaughter in a shooting that killed a 6-year-old autistic boy, have prompted many news headlines to cite “a significant rise in police killing convictions” in the recent period. This misleading claim has no practical basis in reality.

On-duty officers shoot and kill more than a thousand people each year. Of those incidents fewer than two officers a year on average are charged with a crime, with an even smaller number resulting in convictions. Since 2005, 69 officers have been charged in on-duty shootings: 23 have been convicted, 26 were not convicted and 20 cases are pending, according to research by Philip Stinton, a Bowling Green State University criminologist. Of those who were convicted, the vast majority faced lesser charges of manslaughter, and the average jail sentence was just over three years.

The year following the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, which led to massive protests throughout the country, 18 officers were charged in state courts with murder or manslaughter in fatal on-duty shootings—the most in any year going back to 2005. This statistical jump was hailed at the time as proof of a virtuous justice system in action. Yet, in 2015, as in 2014, not a single officer was convicted.

This precedent of immunity has been upheld despite, and partly in spite of, the massive public outrage against police brutality expressed through years of nationwide protests. The routine of exoneration has

been applied to the officers responsible for the murder of Michael Brown in 2014, of 12-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland in 2015, and all six officers involved in the 2015 murder of Freddie Gray in Baltimore Maryland.

The handful of convictions and lesser forms of disciplinary action recently brought against the already miniscule number of police officers who are charged for crimes of police brutality do not mark a departure from the prevailing policy of near complete immunity for killer cops. Rather, the details of the two cases cited, as well as recent data on indictments and convictions, further expose the true nature of the police force which operates as a tool of the state to maintain a system of class oppression.

The first instance of police “convictions” cited is the case of New York City officer, Richard Haste, who quit on Sunday after being found guilty of “using poor tactical judgment” in a Police Department disciplinary review on Friday. The case in question involved the shooting of 18-year-old Ramarley Graham in February 2012. Haste is white and Graham was African American.

Officer Haste chased Graham from a nearby bodega into his apartment in the Bronx based on the belief that the youth had a gun. After forcibly entering his home, the officer cornered Graham in his bathroom where he then fatally shot the youth in front of his grandmother and 6-year-old brother. In the end, no gun was found.

This “guilty verdict” came from the New York Police Department’s (NYPD) disciplinary review board; Haste had neither been charged nor convicted of a

crime. In 2012, both a judge, and later a grand jury, dismissed manslaughter charges for the murder of Graham. The most extreme disciplinary action possible in the NYPD hearing would have been his removal from the police force, a punishment which Haste avoided by resigning.

The officer in the second cited case, Derrick Stafford, was convicted on Friday on a lesser charge of manslaughter in a shooting that left a 6-year-old autistic boy, Jeremy Mardis, dead, and his father, Christopher Few, critically injured. Stafford and another deputy city marshal, whose court date is set for later this year, opened fire on Few's car after a two-mile chase in Marksville, Louisiana on November 3, 2015.

The video of the incident, caught on tape by another officer's body camera, shows Few with hands raised inside his vehicle while the two deputies collectively fire 18 shots into the car. The first grader, who was buckled into the front seat, was hit with five bullets and died within minutes.

The gruesome video shows Few bleeding profusely from two gunshot wounds as his body slumps out of the car window. He eventually exits the car and collapses onto the ground. None of the present officers appears to provide medical attention. Few would not fully regain consciousness again for six days, waking up the day of his son's funeral.

Few was not armed, and as the video clearly shows he was not using the vehicle as a weapon at the time of the shooting as the officers initially claimed. Both officers involved in the shooting are African American. Jeremy was white, as is his father.

Practitioners of identity politics continue to insist that the rampant police murders, including the two incidents cited above, are entirely the result of racism. In fact, while black men are disproportionately killed by the police, the largest numbers of those killed by police in a given year are white.

The two youth who were killed in these incidents are primarily the victims of the massive police state apparatus forged through the intensification of imperialist wars abroad and social counterrevolution at home in defense of the capitalist system, not from a country brimming with racism.

The underlying aim of insisting on a racist narrative to explain police violence is to obscure the fundamental class issues involved and promote

dangerous divisions among the working class along arbitrary racial lines.

Police officers of every race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation patrol the streets in service of the ruling class, with ever more blatant ruthlessness, harassing and killing the poor and working class members of society with near full immunity on a daily basis.

With the Trump administration pandering to all institutions of state repression from local police forces to military generals and the intelligence community, it is safe to say that the new administration will not be marked by an increase in police killing convictions. The vast expansion of an already deadly state apparatus being prepared by the Trump administration is expressed most acutely in the current attack on immigrants.



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