

Notes on police violence

Fifteen-year-old high school freshman with BB gun killed by police in San Diego

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Early Saturday morning, two San Diego police officers shot and killed a 15-year-old boy holding a BB gun outside Torrey Pines High School, in the North County Coastal area of San Diego, California.

The officers arrived at the school on Del Mar Heights Road after receiving a 911 call requesting a welfare check at 3:27 a.m. The caller reportedly asked that someone check on a youth who was standing outside of the school. The caller also stated that the person was not armed. The police have now confirmed that the boy who was killed was the same one who made the call.

The two officers arrived in separate vehicles but at about the same time. Acting Homicide Captain Mike Holden recounted the sequence of events to media outlets, saying that when they stepped out of their vehicles to talk to the boy he “pulled a handgun that was concealed in his waistband and pointed it at one of the officers.” The officers immediately drew their guns and told the boy to drop the weapon. The boy allegedly continued pointing the gun at one of the officers and began to approach him. Both officers then fired at the boy, striking him several times.

The boy, whose name has not been released because of his age, was pronounced dead at Scripps Memorial La Jolla. He was a freshman high school student at Torrey Pines High School.

There were two officers involved in the shooting; one has been with the police department for 28 years, and the other for four. Neither were injured in the incident. One of the officers is on the department’s juvenile services team, a special program apparently designed to keep young people out of trouble and to “intervene early when they come in contact with the law,” training that apparently was unable to prevent the killing of the

unarmed youth Saturday morning.

Torrey Pines High School, which has about 3,000 students enrolled in grades nine through 12, is located in an affluent neighborhood in San Diego with an average household income of well over \$100,000. The killing took place only hours before many of the students were scheduled to take the SATs, a standardized test used for college applications, at the high school.

Since the only other person who was present on the scene was killed, the only version of the story that is known at this point is that of the police department. Both officers were wearing body cameras, but footage of the incident has not been released.

There are several unusual aspects to this case. First, it is unclear why the youth called in the welfare check on himself. Moreover, he explicitly stated in the call that he was unarmed. Why the officers needed to fire “several” rounds into the 15-year-old’s body to “ensure their safety” is also unclear, though not uncommon in police killings.

Despite the very few details that have been released about the personal life of the boy and his family, the *Washington Post* ran a piece on Sunday morning headlined, “Teen with BB gun enlisted San Diego officers in suicide plot, police say.” The article paints the officers as victims of the student’s preconceived plan: “Police traced the original 911 call and determined that the teen was the one who had summoned officers to the school, apparently enlisting them in his suicide plot.”

The article continues, without substantiation, to lament the incident as a “suicide by cop.” The 911 welfare call is hardly grounds to declare the

motivations of the teenager. It is just as likely that the call was a cry for help.

The *Post* article goes on to state: “Although no one keeps specific numbers on ‘suicides by cop,’ a 2014 report by the National Sheriffs’ Association estimated that a third of police shootings fall into that category. In such situations, officers often have little say-so in anything but the final act, while the suicidal person may have planned or even practiced the encounter.”

There is nothing resembling reality in these claims. Of the 957 people killed by police in 2016, 25 percent of the victims had clear and discernible signs of mental illness. About 46 percent of those killed, or 441 people, were not armed with a gun. Forty-four people had a toy weapon of some kind. Forty-seven people were neither armed nor driving a car in a way the police deemed “dangerous.” About a third of the victims, or 329 people, were fleeing.

Even if one were to accept the figure of one-third of police killings being a form of suicide, this would by itself be a devastating indictment of American society and the consequences of social dislocation and inequality.

Texas police officer who killed teen charged with murder

Just before Saturday’s police killing, the Balch Springs, Texas officer who killed 15-year-old Jordan Edwards as he was being driven away from a party, was arrested on a murder charge. Bail for the officer was set at \$300,000.

The officer, Roy Oliver, posted bond within a few hours and was out of the jail before 10 p.m. Saturday—a courtesy that would not be extended to a working class youth charged with a similar crime.

Oliver, who is white, justified his murder of Edwards, who was black, by claiming that the car was backing up “aggressively” at him. Police were quickly forced to admit that the car, driven by Edwards’ brother, was actually driving away from Oliver. The department fired him on Tuesday.

Edwards, who was a freshman at Mesquite High School in the Northern Texas town of 25,000, was

buried on Saturday. His service was attended by more than 800 people.

The arrest of an officer for even the most egregious of police killings is rare, and a conviction is uncertain, given the wide leeway the Supreme Court has granted police to kill ordinary people.



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