

The murder of Justine Damond and police violence in America

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Last Saturday, Justine Damond, a 40-year-old yoga instructor and native of Australia, became the latest in the long line of victims of homicidal police violence in the United States. She was shot and killed by officer Mohamed Noor in an alleyway behind her home in a middle-class area of Minneapolis.

While few details have been released, what is known about Damond's killing provides insight into the social and psychological underpinnings of the epidemic of police brutality and murder that has already claimed at least 675 lives since the beginning of the year.

Noor and his partner Matthew Harrity were responding to a 911 call from Damond around 11:30 p.m., reporting a possible rape near her home. According to investigators, Harrity and Noor were driving through the well-lit alley behind Damond's home in their squad car with the lights off when they were startled by a loud noise.

When Damond, unarmed and in her pajamas, appeared at the driver's side door, Noor immediately opened fire from the passenger seat, shooting across Harrity and through the door, striking and killing Damond. No explanation has been given as to why Noor had his gun drawn.

Investigators have determined that while the officers were both wearing body cameras, neither of the cameras were turned on at the time of the incident. Neither is there footage from the police car's dash camera.

The fatal shooting came less than one month after police officer Jeronimo Yanez was acquitted on all charges related to the 2016 shooting death of Philando Castile in Falcon Heights, a suburb of Minneapolis. The immediate aftermath of the shooting was streamed live on Facebook by Castile's girlfriend, sparking nationwide protests against police violence.

Noor, the first Somali-American police officer in his precinct, undoubtedly confronted difficulties as a young immigrant from a country devastated by years of war stoked by the US government. Before becoming a cop, he earned a business degree and worked in property management.

There is no indication that this was an individual likely to end up senselessly shooting and killing an unarmed person. Evidently, however, two years in the police department sufficiently shaped—and warped—his mental and emotional makeup to turn him into a killer.

Noor has so far refused to give his own account of Damond's killing to investigators. But the particularly bizarre and arbitrary character of his action suggests that it was an act of savage violence waiting to happen. He seems to have instinctively reacted to a loud sound and the sudden appearance of a person at the door of his squad car like a man under threat for his life. He was likely conditioned by his training and the atmosphere that prevails in his police precinct—like those across the country—to view the public as a hostile force and himself as a part of an army of occupation.

This, in fact, is an accurate characterization of the social function of the police in working class and poor communities in capitalist America. It is not simply or primarily a question of Noor's subjective state of mind. Or, to put it differently, his outlook, pervasive in the highly militarized police departments around the country, is rooted in and reflects objective social relations.

For all the media talk of “a few bad apples” and pathetic proposals for “better training” of the police, cops are instructed to shoot-to-kill whenever they encounter anyone they feel is threatening their life or the lives of others.

The police today are armed to the hilt with the latest

military style weaponry, including armored vehicles, tanks and attack helicopters. At least one in five police officers is a veteran of bloody US wars in Iraq, Afghanistan or elsewhere.

After a quarter century of war waged by the US government abroad, including more than 15 years of the “war on terror” that knows no physical boundaries or time limits, police at home have adopted the same “counterinsurgency” tactics and mindset. Officer Harry’s attorney told the media that it was “reasonable” to assume that the officers thought they were being “ambushed” when Damond approached their car.

With approximately three people killed every day by police in the US, barely a day goes by without a news story or video exposing yet another gruesome police murder or violent attack. Police shootings on such a scale are a phenomenon peculiar to the US among the advanced economies. No country in Europe even comes close.

Police officers maim, shoot and kill with virtually complete impunity. As is the case with Noor and Harry, officers involved in violent incidents are placed on paid leave during an investigation. It is exceedingly rare that an officer who kills or brutally beats someone is charged with a criminal offense. If charged, it is even less likely that he or she will be convicted.

American life has become increasingly militarized, whether it is at airports, on shopping streets, or during major holidays, heavily armed police and security forces are regularly deployed. No major sporting event can be held without the repeated and incessant promotion and glorification of the military.

These developments are inextricably connected to the terrific intensification of class tensions. In a society where the richest eight individuals own more wealth than the bottom half of the world’s population, the ruling oligarchy must ultimately rely on sheer state violence to defend its power and privileges and is preparing for social upheavals by putting in place the infrastructure of police-state rule.

This Sunday marks the 50th anniversary of the onset of the Detroit “riot,” the biggest and bloodiest of a massive wave of urban eruptions that hit virtually every major city in the United States. A combined total of more than 17,000 military and paramilitary forces, including 4,700 federal troops, were mobilized to

brutally suppress an uprising of the most oppressed sections of the working class in what was then the center of auto production in the US and the world. These rebellions were, for the most part, sparked by police brutality and racism.

A major part of the response of the ruling class was the establishment of specially armed and trained police units, such as the SWAT teams in Los Angeles, tasked with terrorizing and intimidating the working class. In the intervening years, the police have only become more brutal and violent.

Even though the class struggle has been artificially suppressed in recent decades, due mainly to the treachery of the trade unions, social tensions are higher than ever. The American population is seen by police as a hostile enemy that could erupt at any moment. The police feel threatened everywhere they turn, even in middle-class, largely white neighborhoods.

The killing of Damond exposes the absurdity of token liberal reforms proposed or implemented over the last few decades as a supposed means of tempering police violence, including body cameras, racial sensitivity training, and the racial integration of police forces.

Police violence is not a result of a few bad cops, poor training, a lack of public oversight or too few minority cops. While each incident may differ in its details, police violence is ultimately rooted in the capitalist system itself.



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