

Rhode Island: State and Providence police shoot dead unarmed driver trying to escape traffic stop

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At 10:45 on Thursday morning, based only on an erroneous tip about another crime, Providence and Rhode Island State Police provoked a high-speed traffic chase that ended in their firing some 40 bullets into a pickup truck and killing its unarmed driver. The deadly police assault happened on a busy highway on-ramp next to the Providence Place Mall.

Rhode Island Department of Transportation video footage shows at least five police cars chasing the white Ford F250 truck through traffic onto Route 10 after its driver, Joseph J. Santos, drove away from an attempted traffic stop. In order to stop the truck from getting on Interstate 95, which could have led to an interstate chase, another Providence police vehicle blocked the on-ramp.

Santos, unable to escape and boxed in with other drivers whose safety was threatened by the police actions, tried to ram the car in front of him while police on foot surrounded his pickup. Five Providence and four State police officers fired on him when he rammed the other car.

Video footage shows a cloud of smoke from the tires of Santos' pickup, which were still spinning furiously after he had been shot dead.

In a press conference to address the shooting, Providence Public Safety Commissioner Steven Paré coldly told reporters: "When we use deadly force, it's to eliminate. It's just that: deadly force."

The incident began when Donald W. Morgan escaped State Police custody the same morning. Morgan, who had been arrested for an unrelated crime, was being driven to court from the Lincoln Woods Barracks when the trooper driving the cruiser stopped to check on another accident. The trooper left his keys in the

ignition and Morgan, whose hands had been cuffed in front of him, got into the front seat and drove off.

Morgan abandoned the police cruiser about 15 minutes later, not even taking the trooper's gun with him. He has since been found and arrested again. But a witness told Providence Police that they thought they'd seen him getting into the bed of a white pickup.

Police then pulled over several white pickups, including the F250 driven by Santos. It is unclear whether Santos knew of Morgan's crimes, but he was not involved in them. He himself had a record of nonviolent but serious crimes including credit card fraud and larceny, and he had two outstanding warrants. His passenger, Christine Demers, has a history of drug-related crimes. The two had reason to be afraid of going back to jail, and tried to escape the police on Thursday morning. Demers was critically injured in Thursday's shooting.

Santos' sister, Justine, told WJAR-TV: "He was probably nervous that he was going to get pulled over and sent back to jail, so he didn't want to stop. ... He was a good person that was scared, and not the person trying to hurt people that they're trying to say he was."

TV news showed police in military-style uniforms and carrying M4 assault rifles as they scoured residential neighborhoods looking for Morgan. A commenter on the *Providence Journal's* web site posted that "they invaded a neighborhood in Providence with assault weapons roaming the streets in gangs 6 strong in full combat gear ... as if they were going into Afghanistan or the slums of Rio. That is what they think of the neighborhood and the people in it."

The State Police acquired their M4 rifles three years ago through the federal 1033 program, and have since added what a *Providence Journal* article recently described as “the same Kevlar helmets worn by members of the U.S. military in full-blown combat engagements and ... black bullet-proof vests emblazoned with ‘State Police’ patches.”

According to data researched by WPRI in 2014, municipal police in Providence County had acquired nearly \$1.7 million worth of military equipment from the federal government through its 1033 program, including infrared rifle sights, night goggles, 90 5.56 millimeter rifles, and an armored truck. The fiscal year 2018 Providence Police budget of \$76.86 million dwarfs the Fire Department’s budget by more than \$6 million. The police’s budget for guns and ammunition jumped from \$70,000 in fiscal year 2016 to \$111.7 million in fiscal year 2017. Between fiscal year 2014 and fiscal year 2016 its budget for salaries jumped from \$22 million to \$29.8 million, a 35 percent increase.

After the execution of Santos, the Providence police tried to defend the shooting by releasing video which portrayed his actions as a public safety danger, focusing in particular on his ramming of the car ahead of him after he was cornered. The five Providence officers who fired their guns have been put on administrative leave, but have the full backing of their superiors.

At a news conference on Friday, Providence Police Chief Hugh T. Clements Jr. said about the video that was being released: “We believe that video shows the acts of the officers as doing exactly what we would want them to do in stopping an imminent and significant threat.”

The State Police have taken the opposite tack by keeping secrets and refusing even to divulge the name of the trooper who let Morgan escape.

Despite Providence’s attempts at “transparency,” however, only one of the three cops who were wearing body cameras turned his on. A second claimed that he’d forgotten, and the third that he tapped his on switch once instead of twice.



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