

New York City police kill unarmed mentally ill man in Brooklyn

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New York Police Department (NYPD) officers fired 10 bullets into Saheed Vassell, a 32-year old unarmed African-American man with a mental illness, in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn in New York City on Wednesday afternoon. The police allegedly received a 911 call that a man was pointing a gun at passersby. Vassell was holding a pipe.

After the shooting, scores of residents assembled in an impromptu protest at the crime scene.

According to witnesses, police—three plainclothes officers and a uniformed officer—arrived in an unmarked police car, and one plainclothes officer started firing as soon as he stepped out of the car. One witness told the media that officers fired without identifying themselves.

“They just hopped out of the car. It’s almost like they did a hit. They didn’t say please. They didn’t say put your hands up, nothing.”

Another witness said, “We hear the first shot, the guy went down, and they started firing again.” Some media sources note that police called an ambulance for Vassell only 27 seconds after they reported arriving on the scene.

Vassell was well known in the neighborhood and had prior encounters with NYPD officers. The department had classified him as emotionally disturbed, according to the *New York Times*.

NYPD Chief Terence Monahan said at a press conference that when the officers got to the street corner, Vassell turned to face them and aimed the object at them. “The suspect then took a two-handed shooting stance and pointed an object at the approaching officers.”

As part of the effort to absolve the officers and defuse anger over the killing, the NYPD released selectively edited surveillance video on Thursday which shows

Vassell pointing the pipe at a handful of pedestrians. However, the video does not show their reactions and cuts off just before he was gunned down in the street by the police.

Vassell’s killing follows Tuesday’s shooting by campus police at the University of Chicago of a mentally ill student who was smashing windows with a metal pole. Police allege they fired after the student pointed the metal pole at them and he failed to drop it. The student was taken to a hospital in serious condition.

It also comes two and half weeks after two Sacramento, California police officers shot Stephon Clark eight times—six in the back—in his grandmother’s back yard as he was carrying a cell phone in his hand, which police claim they mistook for a weapon. The killing has sparked ongoing protests in Sacramento.

It is unlikely that the officers who killed Vassell will be charged with a crime, or, if they are, that they will be convicted. NYPD Sergeant Hugh Barry returned to active duty just last month after he was acquitted of criminal charges in the killing of Deborah Danner in the Bronx in 2016. Danner was also unarmed and mentally ill.

The fact that Vassell was well known in the neighborhood as a mentally ill person who performed odd jobs and panhandled at a nearby subway station underscores the hostility of the NYPD, and city government in general, towards the working class in Brooklyn. While witnesses told the media that he was known to police who were regularly assigned to the neighborhood, this information was apparently not provided to the officers who responded from a specialized anti-crime unit.

Disturbingly, the uniformed officer present at the shooting was a member of the heavily-armed Strategic

Response Group, an 800-person unit created in 2015 by then Police Commissioner William Bratton. The unit was officially formed as a quick-response team to terrorist attacks and civil unrest. However, the unit was proposed in February 2015 following mass demonstrations against the exoneration of the NYPD cop who choked to death Eric Garner in Staten Island in July 2014.

Bratton remarked at the time that the SRG's "officers will have the dedicated mission of protecting locations [and] being able to assist us in dealing with demonstrations." He added that the new unit would be used for "disorder control," and "the officers will have the dedicated mission of protecting locations [and] being able to assist us in dealing with demonstrations."

It remains unexplained why an officer from this unit was sent to confront Vassell. One thing is certain: the SRG will play a role in quelling the demonstrations that will follow from the latest in an apparently unending wave of police murders.

Several hundred gathered Thursday afternoon for a vigil at the corner where Vassell was killed. Later in the evening 300 protestors marched to the nearby police precinct headquarters to demand that the officers involved be fired and for charges to be brought against them. Dozens of police officers mobilized in response to the protests, including officers keeping watch on surrounding rooftops.

S.K., a construction worker and neighbor of Vassell's, explained to the WSWs, "It was a straight murder, and they get away with it. They knew he was mentally ill for years. They all know, because they patrolled the block for years. He's always here. They know he never killed nobody, he never harmed nobody. He never did nothing. He's a mentally ill man he should have been helped—we have to get something going for the mentally ill."

"Nothing is going to happen to these cops," he continued. "If anything does they'll say they thought the pole was a gun and get off. But they should prosecute the cops, to make him tell the truth."

Another neighbor remarked, "We don't need the police. They shot him down like a wild wolf. It's not only white cops, it's black cops too, it's something wrong with the department. It's everywhere."

Vassell was a well-known neighborhood figure, she explained. "He wasn't homeless, he just came outside

like everybody else. If you walk down the block and you didn't see him, something was wrong. So if we could see him every day, every cop that rolled past here saw him every day, and they knew he wasn't violent."

Amen Anu, who grew up in the neighborhood, told the WSWs about some of the trauma which may have contributed to Vassell's mental state. "When he was young, years ago, his best friend got killed by police. And this contributed to his mental instability. His best friend was killed by police, and then his other friend was killed by a shooting that occurred, and his other friend died in a motorcycle accident, and since then he's never been the same. So it's really the streets that caused him to—you know, not everybody's mentally strong to cope with certain things. I mean, he never got help."

"We deal with these killings all the time," Anu said. "I have PTSD from growing up here in the '80s. I have so many stories of cops robbing me, beating me. There's hardly no crime around here, so what the hell is the problem? They prey on our community, they come and prey, like they're hunting. They look for every little opportunity."



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