

New York police release video and transcripts from shooting of unarmed man in Brooklyn

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9 April 2018

On Friday, the New York Police Department (NYPD) released a “compilation” video and 911 transcripts related to the shooting death of Saheed Vassell, an unarmed mentally ill black man gunned down in Brooklyn on April 4 by four NYPD officers.

The department also issued an account explaining that three plainclothes officers, two white and one black, discharged their weapons nine times, a uniformed officer of Indian descent fired once, two other uniformed officers who were present did not fire their weapons. Two of the uniformed officers were from the elite Special Response Group, and the third was a sergeant from the local precinct.

The video material and 911 transcripts have been quickly published by the NYPD brass in the hope that they will justify the police killing as a regrettable, but understandable, mistake and give the impression that the officers responded in a reasonable and proportionate manner, given the situation.

The video is meant to bolster the argument first issued by the NYPD that, “the suspect ... took a two-handed shooting stance and pointed an object at the approaching officers, two of whom were in uniform.” The media quoted the NYPD Chief of Detectives, Robert K. Boyce continuing this narrative, saying, “These officers didn’t have much time. When you’re presented with an immediate threat, it is different from being able to step back and talk.”

Police officials also said on Friday that the officers involved repeatedly told Vassell to “drop it,” although witnesses claim to have heard nothing before the police fired their weapons. Footage is still being withheld from one video camera that the NYPD claims recorded the shooting on the grounds that the killing is now being investigated by the Brooklyn District Attorney’s office.

The video compilation, running at about two minutes, shows a man, allegedly Vassell, pretending to shoot people with an object in his hands, on the street. Almost no one seems threatened and most people, inches from the man, hardly notice him.

The NYPD has also published the transcripts of the three 911 calls. One caller, presumably the first, makes it clear that no one had been shot and that the man was pointing an object that might be a gun: “He looks like he is crazy, but he’s pointing something at people that looks like a gun and he’s like popping it like he’s pulling the trigger. He’s not pulling a trigger, but he’s making a motion as if he is, and there is something sticking out of his jacket.”

Two of the callers, when questioned by the 911 operator, said they were not sure if the man was holding a gun. Another transcript relayed the fear and anguish which bystanders felt when the police opened fire on Vassell.

The media have also joined in supporting the notion that the police acted in a measured manner. On Saturday, the *New York Daily News* published an interview with one of the 911 callers who said that the police behaved correctly. The right-wing, Murdoch-owned *New York Post*, predictably, editorialized in favor of the cops, calling for stronger laws to get mentally ill people to take their medication, suggesting that Vassell was a threat and that he was “dangerously” ill.

New York City’s Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio on Friday defended his community policing program—whose purpose is to cultivate police informers in working-class neighborhoods—as an antidote to police killings. He repeated the official NYPD narrative that there was not enough time for police to know that Vassell was mentally ill and posed no threat.

The family of Saheed Vassell has continued to insist that the police should be charged with murder. Eric Vassell, Saheed's father, questioned the selective release of footage asking on Saturday why, "There's no videotape to show the actions of the police."

Vassell was the 331st person killed by the police this year and another fifteen people have been murdered just since Wednesday according to killedbypolice.net. According to a separate tally by the *Washington Post*, there have been 12 more police killings this year than at the same time last year.



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