

Protesters clash with Chicago police after police murder of Harith Augustus

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On Saturday evening, July 14, a violent confrontation between protesters and Chicago police carried on for several hours after 37-year-old Harith “Snoop” Augustus, a local barber, was fatally shot in the back by a police officer in the South Shore neighborhood.

According to the *Washington Post*, police have killed 548 people in the United States this year, 20 more than at this time last year. While the largest number of those killed has been white, a disproportionate number are, like Augustus, African-American.

The killing of Augustus was not the only police murder Saturday in the United States. In Vineland, New Jersey, just south of the Philadelphia metropolitan area, police gunned down an unarmed 37-year-old black man who was shirtless and visibly unarmed, according to bystanders. Rashaun Washington was carrying a water bottle when police began a confrontation with him. Several bystander cellphone videos show Washington standing his ground before one cop shouts “bomb” and fires three shots into him, killing him, and a police K-9 dog began biting him. There was no bomb, or any suggestion of violence by the victim.

The Chicago killing was equally unprovoked. According to Antoine Howell, a co-worker, Harith Augustus had left the barbershop to get ready for Howell’s bachelor party later that evening: “He cut my hair and got killed 10 minutes later.” After buying some cigarettes, Augustus was approached by a Chicago Police Department (CPD) officer using the excuse that he was selling loose cigarettes, a minor form of tax evasion normally applied to businesses, but also wielded against individuals the police would like to harass. Notably, Eric Garner in New York City was also approached by police on the same pretext, before his 2014 death in a police chokehold. According to witnesses, Augustus denied the charge, but the confrontation escalated and Augustus was shot five times in the back as he tried to run away.

Following the shooting, neighborhood residents and protesters began to assemble in Jeffery Plaza, a local shopping mall, with scores of officers called in for crowd control as the tension among the demonstrators began to

escalate. The police officer who shot Augustus was reportedly whisked away from the scene as a crowd began to form. Protesters repeatedly called the police “murderers,” “cowards,” and chanted “Who do you serve? Who do you protect?” A number of protesters asked black and Hispanic police officers, “Whose side are you on?” The crowd grew in the parking lot, facing off with police through a fence, and some threw water bottles at the line of officers.

The police entered the parking lot where protesters were gathered and charged them with batons. By the end of the evening, close to 100 officers were reportedly on the scene, with nearly as many police as protesters. A mobile phone video shows police rushing the protesters and chasing them as they dispersed through the parking lot. Other videos shared on social media show CPD officers hitting people with batons and striking others who are being held down to the ground. Some protesters are seen being dragged away by police.

A number of the protesters tried to intervene to stop police from beating people. A woman at the scene can be heard shouting at police, “You stop hitting people! You stop hitting people, you violent motherf---!” Charlene Carruthers, who was shoved to the ground by police, told the *Sun-Times*: “It is completely unacceptable for us to pay for them to kill us.”

A *Sun-Times* reporter on the scene, Nader Issa, tweeted, “The situation just severely escalated when Chicago Police Officers moved their line forward. Officers hit multiple protestors with batons, and protestors punched officers back. I haven’t seen a police shooting scene this tense since Laquon [sic] McDonald,” and later, “Two officers smacked my phone out of my hand and shoved me to the ground.” This happened despite Issa clearly displaying his press credentials.

According to police officials, four protesters were arrested, with one facing three felony charges and the others already released from custody with no charges.

From this point the police response began to escalate, with helicopters used to monitor people’s movements. Reports

indicate police requested permission for the use of dogs and a sound cannon, or long range acoustic device, to disperse the crowd, but the requests were denied.

Following the dispersal of the crowd from near the scene of the murder, a group then formed at the CPD Third District police station to demand the release of those arrested in the parking lot.

As is typical in cases of police murder, CPD's top officials and spokespeople have begun working to vilify the shooting victim and protesters. Early CPD statements said the "man exhibited characteristics of an armed person," a description that can mean virtually anything at all, and in any case, assuming one has the proper licenses, is not actually illegal. On Twitter, Issa wrote that those who knew him said Augustus had a permit to carry a concealed weapon, but CPD has attempted to cast doubt on this.

In early reports intended to defuse widespread anger at police over yet another killing, CPD spokesman Anthony Guglielmi said, "A weapon was recovered at the scene along with several magazines of ammunition."

Later, at a late-night press conference held outside the CPD headquarters, Chief of Patrol Fred Waller worked to add to the police narrative, saying that Augustus had "a bulge near his waistband and became combative." This is directly contradicted by many at the scene, who said Augustus had remained calm and made no motion to draw his gun or reach for it. One witness, Gloria Rainge, said Augustus was "cool, laid back, very intelligent."

Local activist William Calloway announced that he has filed a FOIA request for police body-camera footage. The Civilian Office of Police Accountability (COPA), the latest agency created by the city to try and cover-up police killings, said it is reviewing the footage and would release it to the public in 60 days, unless ordered not to by a court, evidently anticipating a legal challenge from the police officer.

Guglielmi's statement to the *Chicago Tribune* summing up the police version of events scarcely hides the fact that Augustus was harassed by police, "He looked like he may have something on him. They go to question him, and at that point a confrontation ensues and he is shot."

Waller said in his press briefing, "The police department gets no joy in these types of incidents ... It's not something that they plan to do. It's just a tragic incident all the way around."

The killing of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald on October 20, 2014 provoked mass anger in the city of Chicago as well as across the country and internationally after police video was finally released many months later. Despite the violent and brutal manner of his execution by police officer Jason Van Dyke, it took more than a year to bring charges against

him and then only due to a whistleblower who made the existence of the video known. The city covered up the murder by suppressing video footage as long as it could and by paying the family an unprecedentedly large \$5 million settlement.

Like the city of Chicago more generally, the South Shore neighborhood where the police shooting took place is extremely unequal. Sitting just north of the US Steel's South Works (closed in 1992, it employed 20,000 before its decline), South Shore became a predominantly African-American neighborhood in the 1960s and had a large middle class until recently. It now has a median household income of \$26,000 per year and an official poverty rate of 35 percent. The neighborhood also has an important political history, home to the Nation of Islam and a number of celebrities and politicians, including Jesse Jackson and former US Senator Carol Moseley Braun.

Working class neighborhoods view the police as an occupying force. Last year, a Department of Justice investigation into excessive use of force and harassment by Chicago police, over the period January 2011 to April 2016, concluded that the CPD engaged in a series of "pattern or practices" that violate the US Constitution. It followed similar reports from cities from Baltimore, Cleveland, and Ferguson, Missouri to New Orleans that revealed the real brutality of class relations in the United States.

Chicago police routinely use deadly and unreasonable force, including against children, engage in dangerous foot chases that result in officers shooting at someone who is posing no immediate threat, use Tasers to kill, terrorize neighborhoods with highly militarized police tactical units, manufacture false evidence and intimidate witnesses. The report also found that "officers shoot at vehicles without justification," "exhibit poor discipline when discharging their weapons," and engage in violent tactics "that endanger themselves and public safety."



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