

The police murder of Isiah Murrietta-Golding

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Shock and outrage continue to reverberate around the world following the release Wednesday of a video showing the police murder of Isiah Murrietta-Golding in Fresno, California in April 2017.

It was a sunny Saturday, and the video shows the 16-year-old boy scrambling over a low fence and taking a few steps onto an empty preschool lawn. Then, in a moment that jars horribly with the bright green and pristine surroundings, the boy suddenly collapses to the ground and curls into a fetal position—his brain pierced by a single bullet fired by police officer Ray Villalvazo, who was crouched on the other side of the fence.

An audio recording of the shooting indicates that immediately after the boy's body drops to the ground, another officer shouts, "Good shot!" The expression and tone of voice suggest that the officers are on a hunting safari, and someone has just bagged a prize animal.

Something truly awful is suggested about the state of American society by the footage of another officer jogging up to the boy's limp body, hoisting it up by one arm, kicking it over, and then handcuffing the wrists together—a rote action simultaneously brutal and absurd.

The video explodes the official account of the shooting, according to which the boy had "reached into his waistband several times," prompting the officer to shoot him in self-defense because he was afraid for his life.

According to the available accounts, Isiah was a good student at his school, where he was in the 10th grade. He has been described as a "small boy," standing 5 foot 4 inches tall and weighing 109 pounds. He died several days later at the hospital, his grief-stricken mother at his side.

His alleged involvement in an incident that led to a fatal car crash with his older brother the previous day remains murky. He may just have been in the wrong place at the wrong time. But even if he was in some way culpable, as a minor he would have been subject to confidential juvenile proceedings and efforts at rehabilitation, not summary assassination by a police officer acting as judge, jury and executioner.

When he was stopped by the police, Isiah initially complied with instructions. He was unarmed, never threatened anyone, and never attempted to hurt anyone. He simply tried to run away. One cannot help imagining the boy's final, terrified moments.

According to a lawsuit filed by the boy's parents, the officers delayed calling for medical assistance following the shooting. When the ambulance arrived, the police refused a paramedic's request to take the handcuffs off the body, even though the boy was in a coma.

The American military refuses to do "body counts" overseas, and the US government similarly avoids gathering statistics on the use of deadly force by the police within the country's borders. Nevertheless, a *Washington Post* database indicates that around a thousand people are killed by police each year, with 717 killed as of this writing in 2019. This figure likely understates the true number, omitting those killings that are covered up by the police as drug overdoses, suicides, or deaths from "natural causes" or "excited delirium."

The number of deaths from industrial accidents in the US every year, which is in the thousands, is dwarfed by the number of nonfatal accidents and illnesses, which is in the millions. Similarly, while hundreds of people are killed by the police each year, the number of nonfatal injuries caused by the police each year must be orders of magnitude higher, in the tens or hundreds of thousands: broken jaws and teeth, lost eyes, flesh shredded by police dogs, concussions, permanent nerve damage, traumatic brain injuries, broken legs, backs, shoulders and necks.

In the wake of each episode of police brutality, victims and their families watch as the entire state closes ranks behind the perpetrator.

An "internal investigation," conducted in secret by the police, almost invariably results in a determination that the officers were acting "within policy," a determination bolstered in turn by vague policies designed to permit the broadest range of violence.

Meanwhile, in order to help shield officers from accountability, the local prosecutor will often bring charges against the victim, including for such vague crimes as "resisting, delaying, or obstructing" a police officer. In other cases, someone bitten by a police dog will be charged with "battery to a police dog."

In Fresno, the results of the internal investigation into the shooting of Isiah Murrietta-Golding were announced in March of last year: "Sgt. Villalvazo's actions were within department policy."

As late as 1985, in the case of *Tennessee v. Garner*, the US

Supreme Court wrote: “Where the suspect poses no immediate threat to the officer and no threat to others, the harm resulting from failing to apprehend him does not justify the use of deadly force to do so. It is no doubt unfortunate when a suspect who is in sight escapes, but the fact that the police arrive a little late or are a little slower afoot does not always justify killing the suspect. A police officer may not seize an unarmed, nondangerous suspect by shooting him dead.”

However, even after the release of the video, the *Fresno Bee* reports that the Fresno Police Officers Association “is in full support of the sergeant and says its members believe the shooting to be justified.”

As part of his fascistic appeal to law enforcement, President Trump has gone out of his way to incite the police against the population, famously telling a crowd of police officers in New York in 2017 that he likes watching footage of “rough” treatment of “thugs.” “Please don’t be too nice,” Trump intones, drawing cheers from the assembled cops.

At a recent rally in Minnesota, Trump appeared flanked by police officers wearing “Cops for Trump” shirts featuring an American flag and the shapes of police badges. Trump had evidently wanted the officers to appear in uniform, a prohibited form of political endorsement.

Meanwhile, the Democrats, for all their posturing and expressions of concern, preside over cities infamous for police brutality like Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. The Obama administration, for its part, repeatedly intervened on the side of the police in civil rights cases before the Supreme Court, invoking the authoritarian doctrine of “qualified immunity.”

In schools and neighborhoods across the US, the population is seething with anger over the mounting number of victims and the belligerent intransigence of the authorities. Certain political conclusions must be drawn from this state of affairs.

Vladimir Lenin, in his treatise *State and Revolution*, describes how Friedrich Engels draws “the attention of the class-conscious workers to what prevailing philistinism regards as least worthy of attention, as the most habitual thing, hallowed by prejudices that are not only deep-rooted but, one might say, petrified.”

“The state,” Engels writes, “has not existed from all eternity. There have been societies that did without it, that had no idea of the state and state power. At a certain stage of economic development, which was necessarily bound up with the split of society into classes, the state became a necessity owing to this split.”

The state, therefore, “is a product of society at a certain stage of development; it is the admission that this society has become entangled in an insoluble contradiction with itself, that it has split into irreconcilable antagonisms which it is powerless to dispel. But in order that these antagonisms, these classes with conflicting economic interests, might not consume themselves and society in fruitless struggle, it became necessary to have a

power, seemingly standing above society, that would alleviate the conflict and keep it within the bounds of ‘order’; and this power, arisen out of society but placing itself above it, and alienating itself more and more from it, is the state.”

Lenin asks, “What does this power mainly consist of?” It consists mainly of “special bodies of armed men,” together with prisons and other forms of repression. Quoting Engels, Lenin explains that this power becomes more forceful in proportion as class antagonisms become more acute.

In the United States, the institution of the police did not exist on a significant scale until the middle of the 19th century. The development of many of the municipal police departments into their present centralized form in the late 19th century coincided with a massive wave of labor unrest. Modern police departments emerged onto the scene as “special bodies of armed men” that could be deployed against demonstrations of workers, often with extreme violence, and also to make mass arrests of workers for violations of “public order.”

With this social and historical framework in mind, the phenomenon of escalating police violence in the 21st century must be understood in the first instance as a function of the acute crisis of the whole social order. The decades-long social counterrevolution, skyrocketing social inequality, the endless wars for plunder abroad, the paralysis and collapse of democratic institutions, and the resurgence of open struggles by the working class around the world all constitute aggravating factors in the equation.

The reign of arbitrary police terror also functions to condition the population and the police themselves to extreme violence, in preparation for future campaigns of mass repression.

Racism does play a role in many individual episodes of police brutality, and anger over the persistence of such prejudices is legitimate. But those around Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Party, who claim that police brutality is a function primarily of racism, are papering over the deeper causes and serving to deflect criticism from the failing social order itself. The category of race does little to explain the death of Isiah Murrietta-Golding, for example, whose murderer also has a Hispanic surname.

In the final analysis, the epidemic of police brutality in the US, which enjoys the full backing of the state, is a product of a social and economic system in deep crisis. The task, in America and around the world, is to develop socialist consciousness and a revolutionary Marxist leadership within the insurgent international working class—directed not at reforming but at overthrowing that system.



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