

Inmate dies after being pepper sprayed by guards at Brooklyn federal detention center

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5 June 2020

Two days after the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) began a full lockdown, a man at the BOP-run Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, New York died in custody after being pepper sprayed by prison guards. The victim, 35-year-old Jamel Floyd, had been detained at the facility since October 2019.

The news comes as New York Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo announced on Thursday that he intends to override bail reform legislation passed at the beginning of this year. The overturn of the legislation has been a goal of the New York Police Department (NYPD) since it came into effect of January of this year. The peddling back of the reform will be used to impose huge bails on protesters who have been detained while engaging in protest sparked by the police murder of George Floyd, no relation to Jamel, in Minneapolis, Minnesota on Memorial Day. Those who cannot afford to pay will languish in COVID-19-ridden jails as they await sentencing.

According to the BOP, at around 10 a.m. on June 2 an incident occurred in Jamel Floyd's cell. The BOP said that Floyd, "became increasingly disruptive and potentially harmful to himself and others." Before the incident, Floyd is said to have barricaded himself in his cell. Guards came to Floyd's cell after he had broken his cell door with a metal object. The BOP claims that guards then used pepper spray to subdue him.

Floyd was unresponsive after being sprayed. Following attempts at resuscitation by medical staff he was taken to NYU Langone Hospital where he was pronounced dead. The cause of his death was not immediately released by the BOP, but they did confirm it was unrelated to the acute COVID-19 outbreak in America's prison system. However, according to the NYDailyNews, sources in the facility say that Floyd died from a heart attack.

Multiple studies, including one from the *Carolina Medical Journal*, have found that people who breathe in pepper spray experience acute hypertension, a sudden rapid increase in blood pressure that dramatically increases the risk of stroke or heart attack. In response to the ongoing wave of mass protests, the police and the military have employed pepper spray and tear gas against peaceful protesters across the country with impunity. The WSWs reported yesterday that the use of these chemicals by the police may exacerbate the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the pledge of a full investigation from the BOP, it is unlikely that the true circumstances of Floyd's death will ever become public. However, it does seem highly likely that Floyd was suffering from acute mental illness. Already under conditions of intense stress and isolation due to incarceration and the constant fear of contracting COVID-19, it seems likely that the increased isolation imposed by the BOP's full lockdown on May 31 may have been overwhelming.

It is far from clear that the guards who responded to Floyd's distressed actions were under immediate threat of physical harm. Despite breaking a window, reports do not suggest Floyd had left his cell. Rather than responding to the desperate actions of a mentally ill man with compassion and attempts to deescalate the situation, it seems that the BOP guards involved resorted to an unnecessary use of force. This heavy handedness cost Floyd his life.

Jamel Floyd's death is only the latest in a wave of killings of individuals in police custody. George Floyd was killed by asphyxiation as he was being held down by three police officers, including one who kept his knee on the 43-year-old's neck for more than 8 minutes. On June 3, the Pierce County Medical Examiner's Office concluded that the death of a man,

Manuel Ellis, 33, from asphyxiation at the hands of Seattle police on March 3 was a homicide.

Nationwide statistics on deaths in custody are hard to come by. The murders of individuals like George Floyd and Eric Garner, whose murder at the hands of the NYPD was recorded in 2014, occurred during arrest and were caught on camera before being disseminated to the public through social media. However, deaths that occur within prison facilities are often off camera and suppressed from public knowledge. A law was passed by Congress in December 2014 to shed light on killings within correctional facilities. However, five-and-a-half years later, the Department of Justice (DOJ) has still failed to compile the information.

The latest available data from the DOJ is from 2014. In that year, of the 3,927 inmates who died, 269 were listed as suicides and 83 as homicides. The statistics presented do not give specific information about any deaths caused by prison guards. It is unclear how many of these “suicides” or homicides, are really cover-ups.

One suspects that Jamel Floyd’s death might well end up innocuously designated as the result of heart disease, which according to the DOJ killed 890 in 2014. The most significant example of one such “suicide” in murky circumstances was the death of Jeffrey Epstein in August of last year. It might well be the case that every year the actual in-custody death toll of police or prison guard violence is in the hundreds.



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