

Germany: Two people killed by police in the city of Mannheim

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Following the death of a man after his arrest by police, hundreds of people gathered in the city of Mannheim on May 7 to demand a full investigation into the circumstances of his death and an end to growing police violence.

Around 900 protesters demanded justice for the victim, a 47-year-old patient of the Mannheim-based Central Institute (ZI) for Mental Health who came from Croatia. The incident indicates that the type of lethal force used by police in the US and other countries is increasingly becoming the norm in Germany.

Key information about what actually happened is being withheld by the police. What is certain is that a doctor from the ZI went to the city's police station on May 2 to ask police officers to assist in the search for a patient "needing help"—a man with a weak heart who had left the clinic.

Shortly afterwards, two police officers spotted the man in the city centre and overpowered him, allegedly because he had "resisted police control." A video, seen and commented on by tens of thousands on Twitter, shows one of the two officers delivering two punches to the temple of the man, who was pinned to the ground.

Given the patient's "state of extreme mental distress" it must have been clear to the officers that the massive amount of violence they used could have fatal consequences. In fact, the man collapsed shortly afterwards and had to be resuscitated for a period of half an hour. He eventually died in hospital. The two police officers, who have been suspended from duty, are being investigated on suspicion of assault resulting in death.

Participants in the demonstration—and many of the 30 witnesses to the incident—fear a cover-up. According to the public prosecutor's office in Mannheim and the state Criminal Police Office (LKA) in Baden-

Wuerttemberg, the man's body was "confiscated for further investigation." Prior to any official autopsy the LKA, which was provided with more than 70 videos of the crime, reported traces of "blunt force of low intensity." An official cause of death will only be presented in six to eight weeks.

Just days later, another person who was also said to have been in a "state of extreme mental distress," died at the hands of the Mannheim police. The mentally disturbed man had apparently severely wounded himself in an argument with his mother and threatened to kill himself with a knife. Instead of seeking to calm and disarm the 31-year-old, a police officer called to the scene of the incident opened fire and shot the man in the leg. The victim succumbed to his injuries a little later.

The two deaths in the industrial city of Mannheim shed light on a capitalist system that is slashing funding for health care and social services and is increasingly reacting to mounting social problems with naked police violence.

Back in 2014, a television report by the rbb channel reported that people in a "state of extreme mental distress" make up about two thirds of all people killed by the police in Germany.

The case of Tennessee Eisenberg, a music student killed by a special unit by the Bavarian police (USK) in 2009, gained especial notoriety. After lashing out at the 24-year-old with their batons and using pepper spray, USK commandos fired a total of 16 shots, seven of which hit the young man in the back. Despite a lawsuit filed by Eisenberg's parents, an investigation against the officers involved was shut down.

Unlike many other countries, investigations in such cases in Germany are carried out by the police authorities themselves. There is no independent

prosecution authority in Germany, despite the fact that the number of police killings is rising steadily.

According to police statistics, a total of 90 people were killed by police between 2011 and 2019. In 2017, police fired 75 shots at people and in 2019, 62, which means that on average they shoot one person every six days.

These statistics do not include the use of firearms by units of the federal police, whose operations often take place abroad—such as the secret commando operations carried out by the GSG 9 unit or the police “training missions” currently taking place in African Mali and Ukraine.

According to a more accurate analysis by the civil rights organisation CILIP, 306 people have been shot by German police since the reunification of the country in 1990. This number is twice as high as the number of victims killed by East German police at the Berlin Wall over 30 years prior. As *Netzpolitik* magazine writes, citing CILIP research, a large proportion of the victims of fatal shootings in reunited Germany have been mentally ill persons, who “in many cases” were shot inside their own homes.

This murderous record is now being abused by police lobbyists and the governments of federal states to argue for more weaponry for the police, in particular the nationwide use of distance electro-impulse devices (DEIG), or Tasers.

The notoriously right-wing German police union (GdP) claimed at the beginning of this year that Tasers were a non-lethal “alternative to firearms” and could lead to a reduction in the use of force by the police.

International studies and the experience with the weapon in other countries expose this statement as a lie. The use of Tasers can be lethal, especially for people with weakened hearts or pacemakers. The weapon aims to instantly paralyse the target. In addition to the extremely painful electric impulse of the darts penetrating the skin, the victim can fall heavily to the ground and sustain serious injuries. Especially “in the case of mentally ill people,” police scientist Thomas Feltes told the *Mannheimer Morgen* newspaper, the use of Tasers is “completely unsuitable.”

CILIP and *Netzpolitik* have documented six Taser deaths at the hands of the police so far and state that its use leads to “significantly different causes of death than ammunition from firearms”: “The victims die of

cardiac or circulatory arrest, organ failure or choke on their own vomit.” Pneumonia and blood poisoning are also among the fatal consequences.

Many victims had been “Tasered inside buildings” and “in the case of all those killed ... press reports indicate an extreme psychological situation or drug use” among the victims. In Neustadt, near Mannheim, an unresponsive 53-year-old man died last October after being Tasered by the police. However, since the cause of death was not clearly established—according to the autopsy, he “probably ultimately died of a heart attack”—the case was not included in official statistics.

Nevertheless, the states of Hesse, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saarland recently decided to extend the use of tasers from special units to all police on the streets. Similar considerations are taking place in Berlin and Brandenburg. Bavaria had already decided at the end of 2020, “due to the positive experience” of previous pilot projects, to equip all of its USK units and its 30 riot police units with Tasers. In Germany’s biggest state, North Rhine-Westphalia, their use was recently extended to 17 of the state’s largest cities.

The Taser does not, as claimed, serve to replace firearms, but instead is being used much more frequently and with less hesitation than guns. Police director Martin Lotz, who introduced the weapons to the Cologne patrol police, admitted this bluntly on May 2. He described the effect of Taser to WDR news as “harmless” and explained that it would be used instead of a baton or on “occasions where we currently use pepper spray.”

This is the case, Lotz said, when people “do not follow instructions” or are no longer responsive due to being under the influence of drugs. Only hours later, Cologne police officers deployed Tasers against a 25-year-old psychiatric patient who had allegedly ‘rioted in a treatment room.’”



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