

Killing prompts call for federal investigation of Paterson, New Jersey, police department

Erik Schreiber
19 March 2023

A social justice organization has called for the US Department of Justice to investigate the police department of Paterson, New Jersey, citing the latter's "widespread unlawful and unconstitutional conduct." The demand follows the fatal shooting by two Paterson police officers of an anti-violence advocate who was experiencing a mental health crisis. Residents also have demanded criminal charges against the officers involved and the establishment of a civilian complaint review board.

New Jersey Attorney General Matthew J. Platkin is investigating the killing, which has sparked protests that have become increasingly tense. Residents flooded into a city council meeting last week to vent their anger and demand change. Two city officials nearly came to blows during the session.

The victim of the latest police shooting was Najee Seabrooks, who was 31 years old. For two years, Seabrooks had worked as a counselor with the Paterson Healing Collective, a group that supports survivors of violence. He had sought to reduce gun violence in Paterson, acted as a mediator and mentored young people. Days before he was killed, he had counseled the classmates of a 14-year-old boy who was stabbed to death outside Paterson's Eastside High School.

The fatal shooting of Seabrooks has provoked grief and outrage. "Here's a young man that dedicated his life to changing his community, and when he needed a mental health response in a crisis intervention response, instead he's met with force," Liza Chowdhury, the executive director of the Paterson Healing Collective, told NJ Advance Media.

At 7:43 a.m. on March 3, Seabrooks called 911 to report that he was in distress. He was alone at his brother's apartment and had locked himself in a bathroom. He also texted his friends at the Paterson Healing Collective for support. "I want to hear one of y'all's voice," he wrote. "Before they try to kill me. I have a few minutes left." Family members said that Seabrooks was "hallucinating and behaving erratically" but had no history of mental illness.

Members of the police department's Emergency Response Team soon arrived. When members of the Paterson Healing Collective reached the apartment building, the officers prevented them from responding to Seabrooks. Instead, they

were forced to wait in the lobby during a standoff that lasted for more than four hours. Nor did the police ever contact the crisis intervention team at nearby Saint Joseph's University Medical Center during the incident.

Seabrooks began cutting himself with knives. The officers first tried firing sponge-tipped projectiles at him to subdue him. Body camera video reportedly shows that at 12:35 p.m., Seabrooks leapt from the bathroom with a knife. Officers Anzore Tsay and Jose Hernandez fired their guns, striking Seabrooks, who later died at a nearby hospital. Seabrooks is survived by a daughter.

In response to the outpouring of anger about the killing, Mayor André Sayegh, who took office in 2018, touted his own efforts to mandate body cameras for the police force, "because of the need for accountability, transparency and the truth." But the mayor only took this step after coming under intense public pressure following the fatal police shooting of Jameek Lowery in 2019. Neither the provision of body cameras nor the police audit that Sayegh ordered after Lowery's killing has prevented the Paterson police from engaging in further violence.

Sayegh has opposed calls for a Justice Department inquiry into the Paterson Police Department as unnecessary. He cited reforms that he has implemented since 2018, including an early warning system to detect questionable behavior on the part of officers. In addition, Sayegh appointed a new police director last month, increased the length of officer training from four to eight weeks and claims to have referred officers to the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

As public anger and mistrust of the Paterson police have steadily intensified, Sayegh has steadfastly backed the cops. He has minimized the force's pervasive criminality, characterized residents' fears as exaggerated and blamed egregious acts on "a very few number of officers [sic]." As recently as December 2022, Sayegh and Public Safety Director Jerry Speziale went on a public relations offensive to salvage the department's image. The campaign has had little effect.

The Paterson Police Department has become notorious for its violence. Since 2019, there have been eight deaths in Paterson that involved the police. This number is higher than in any other municipality in New Jersey. Six of the deaths involved officers firing their weapons, and two deaths occurred in police

custody. At least 12 officers in Paterson have been criminally charged in the past four years. The city paid \$2 million to settle 16 lawsuits against its officers in the previous three years.

In January, former officer Spencer Finch was charged with aggravated assault, official misconduct and tampering with public records. The charges are related to his assault of a robbery suspect in 2018. Finch beat the suspect with a flashlight, breaking his nose and causing the avulsion of two teeth. In July 2022, Finch was charged with the same offenses for having beaten a man during a domestic dispute and falsifying his police report about the incident.

In June 2022, Officer Jerry Moravek, who was responding to the sound of gunfire, saw a young man run past him. After repeatedly ordering the man, Khalif Cooper, to drop a gun, Moravek shot him in the back as he was running away. Cooper, who was unarmed, sustained a disabling spinal injury and can no longer walk. In February, the state attorney general charged Moravek with second-degree aggravated assault. With the approval of the police department leadership and the law enforcement unions, Moravek's fellow officers took up a collection for him while he was on unpaid suspension.

In February 2022, Paterson officers Jacob Feliciano and Dodi Zorrilla found Felix DeJesus walking around drunk one night, handcuffed him and put him in a patrol car. They later dropped him off in a park in near-freezing temperatures, and no one has seen him since. When his family asked the police for answers, they initially denied having had any contact with DeJesus. They also refused to take information to file a missing person report, insisting that the family file it in Haledon, where DeJesus lived. Feliciano and Zorrilla were later suspended without pay for 90 days for neglect of duty and breaking the rules for body cameras, patrol procedures, transporting citizens and preparing and filing reports.

In December 2021, a plainclothes police officer investigating a reported incident shot and killed Thelonious "RaRa" McKnight Jr. in a dark alley. A 9mm handgun was found near McKnight's body. The police have not explained the reason for the shooting or released the officer's name.

In December 2020, Officers Kevin Patino and Kendry Tineo-Restituyo were sent in an unmarked car to respond to a "suspicious person" report. They physically attacked 19-year-old Osamah Alsaïdi, who was walking to his job at Amazon, without any provocation. After punching the teenager and throwing him to the ground, they charged him with aggravated assault of a police officer. Alsaïdi sustained a concussion, was temporarily blinded, began to have migraine headaches and needed treatment at a hospital. Federal authorities charged Patino and Tineo-Restituyo with violating Alsaïdi's Fourth Amendment rights and with obstruction of justice.

This unrelenting savagery must be understood within the context of the city's history and economic conditions. Paterson is the third-largest city in New Jersey. Nearly two-thirds of residents are Hispanic or Latino, and about a quarter are black.

About 44 percent of people living in Paterson were born abroad. By the late 19th century, Paterson had become a major center of textile manufacturing. It earned the nickname "Silk City" and attracted a large amount of immigrant labor. The mills and factories closed during the deindustrialization that began in the 1980s, and Paterson had already become the fifth-poorest city in the country by 1983. The city's employment rate today is about 54 percent, and its poverty rate is just over 25 percent.

The New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, which has asked US Attorney General Merrick Garland to investigate the Paterson Police Department, describes the violence in racial terms, emphasizing officers' attacks on "black and brown residents." But the role of the police, in Paterson and elsewhere, is to suppress working class opposition to poverty and capitalist exploitation, regardless of workers' race or ethnicity. The appalling police violence in Paterson reflects its residents' poverty, as well as the pressures of the global economic crisis, the ongoing pandemic and NATO's proxy war with Russia.

It is telling that the New Jersey Legislative Black Caucus has not commented on the killing of Seabrooks, especially since its chair, Assemblywoman Shavonda Sumter, represents Paterson in the state legislature. This silence underscores the fact that race- and gender-based political groupings serve the interests of their respective layers of the upper middle class. In the current environment of widespread strikes and worker unrest, such groups appreciate the need for police terror.

Neither a Justice Department investigation of the Paterson Police Department nor the establishment of a civilian complaint review board would produce anything more than cosmetic changes. These measures would not alter the nature of the police as the enforcers of inequality and protectors of wealth. The police will play this role, with all the barbarity they deem necessary, as long as the state remains in the hands of the capitalist class.



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