

Homeless man strangled to death on New York subway

Philip Guelpa
5 May 2023

Jordan Neely, a homeless 30-year-old man, was strangled to death while traveling on an F train subway in Manhattan on Monday. His assailant, identified Thursday night as 24-year-old US Marine Corps veteran Daniel Penny, held Neely in a chokehold until he became motionless. Attempts by paramedics to revive him were unsuccessful. The New York City medical examiner has ruled the death a homicide.

The incident began, according to witnesses, when Neely, who had a history of mental illness, began shouting about being hungry and thirsty, gesticulating and tossing garbage.

Juan Alberto Vazquez, a freelance journalist who happened to be present and shot a video showing the attack, is quoted in the *New York Times* as saying that Neely shouted, “I don’t mind going to jail and getting life in prison,” and, “I’m ready to die.” In a Facebook post, Vazquez wrote that Neely “didn’t seem like he wanted to hurt anyone.” Other passengers reportedly made 911 calls during the incident with varied and seemingly contradictory descriptions of Neely’s behavior.

However, there is no specific indication that Neely directly threatened or assaulted anyone. Nevertheless, the ex-Marine took it upon himself to subdue Neely, place him in a chokehold and bring him to the floor. Penny, who maintained the chokehold for approximately three minutes, was questioned by police and then released without charge. Police and the Manhattan district attorney are conducting investigations.

Neely was a street performer, well known for doing a Michael Jackson impersonation. At the age of 14, he experienced the violent death of his mother. After that, he “just wasn’t the same anymore,” his father told the *Daily News*. There is some evidence of erratic and

violent behavior in his past.

According to a report in the *Daily News*, Neely had assaulted Filemon Castillo Baltazar in 2019 in a Manhattan subway station. Baltazar reacted to Neely’s killing by saying, “He should have been in some rehab center.” Neely was reportedly arrested a total of 42 times over the last decade, mostly for low-level crimes such as turnstile jumping. There was an outstanding warrant for Neely’s arrest regarding a 2021 attack on a 67-year-old woman.

Mayor Eric Adams, a Democrat and former New York Police Department (NYPD) captain, has, since coming to office in 2022, undertaken a right-wing law-and-order campaign, including sweeps of homeless encampments, forceful detention of the mentally ill and an increased police presence in the subways.

A number of public officials, including US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), have called the death of Neely a murder. This drew a quick rebuke from Mayor Adams who has played up Neely’s psychological state as a potentially mitigating circumstance and said judgment should be reserved pending completion of ongoing investigations.

Others have charged that the killing of Neely, who was black, by the ex-Marine, who is white, was an example of systemic racism. This ignores the fact that Mayor Adams is an African-American.

While Penny’s immediate motivations are unknown at this time, it is critically important to assess this incident within its broader context. Over the last several decades the city has experienced a progressive polarization of the population between an ultra-wealthy corporate-financial elite on the one hand and a steady decline in living conditions by the great mass of the population on the other.

New York is the home of Wall Street and center of massive wealth for a few, but for the vast majority of New Yorkers life has become harder. Increasing numbers of residents are finding it difficult to pay for basic necessities such as rent, food and health care.

A recent survey by Change Research found that 73 percent of New York adults had greater difficulty in affording groceries than had been the case last year. Thirty-eight percent said that they suffered food insecurity to the extent that they did not eat at all on some days. The poll also found 29 percent of parents are worried their household will not have enough food to feed their families.

This trend has been greatly accelerated over the last three years by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has prompted an increase in violence and criminal activity, though this has been exaggerated for political purposes. Life expectancy among city residents fell by five years during the first year of the pandemic, with the poorest districts hit the hardest.

The growing homeless population, many of whom experience mental distress as a result, is only the most visible manifestation of the deterioration in social conditions. Even for those who have not fallen into abject poverty, the stresses of daily life, which can erupt into acute crisis at any time, generate a level of fear and anxiety that can manifest itself in negative emotions and behaviors.

The fact that several other passengers in the subway car either assisted the ex-Marine in subduing Neely or stood by without intervening on his behalf points to the tensions and confusion generated by the deep-seated capitalist crisis and the measures employed by the ruling class in an attempt to suppress working class resistance, including the dehumanization of the homeless by the media.

The recent incident on the F train is just the latest in a rapidly proliferating eruption of violent outbursts, including mass shootings and police violence, both in New York and across the country. Whatever the specifics of this or other such incidents, it is impossible to have a clear understanding without analyzing the full social context.

The ruling class, well aware of the explosive nature of the conditions which its system has created, reacts with various tools of repression and disorientation, including the promotion of racism and various forms of

identity politics to divide the working class, and increasing levels of overt violence to suppress it.

Neely's life and death exemplify the social "meat grinder" to which the capitalist system is subjecting an increasing portion of the working class population.

Instead of seeking to address the problems of economic inequality and the resulting homelessness and mental illness in a constructive manner, which is impossible for the ruling class, the "tough on crime" campaign and vendetta against the homeless and mentally ill being conducted by Mayor Adams is part of the strategy of the capitalist class to institute a regime of increasing violence and repression aimed at containing the growing resistance of the working class.



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