

Britain: Police shoot two dead in four days

By Paul Bond
23 July 2001

Police are mounting a show of force in Brixton, London, after a demonstration on Friday ended in a riot. Up to 120 protested peacefully outside Brixton police station following the police shooting of a local man who was holding a novelty cigarette lighter shaped like a gun. Later in the evening youths fought with police and several local shops were looted and several cars set on fire.

British police have shot dead two men in separate incidents within the space of four days. Andrew Kernan, a 37-year old schizophrenic, was shot twice in the chest last Friday July 13 in Liverpool as he waved a samurai sword. On Monday in Brixton, south London, 28-year old Derek Bennett was shot six times by an officer who thought he was armed.

Kernan, a patient at Broadoak Hospital, was at home with his mother Marie when he became agitated. As he became harder to control, his mother called the hospital. When no help was forthcoming, she called the police. Marie Kernan, who had barricaded Andrew in her house for an hour, said "I was so grateful when the police came because I thought I was getting help."

At least six police officers who attended were somehow unable to prevent Andrew, who was dressed in his pyjamas and carrying a sword, from leaving the house. In the street, police attempted, again unsuccessfully, to disable him with CS spray. (Some mental health charities have suggested that CS spray may further agitate disturbed patients). In an evidently confused state, Kernan refused to drop the sword and was shot as he approached a local pub. Shortly before the shots were fired Kernan had been heard calling "Mum! Mum!" Marie Kernan was locked inside a police car at that time and was unable to help her son.

Derek Bennett was a black man from Brixton with a criminal record. Police received a telephone call, claiming that he had been seen arguing in the street. He was waving what was said to be a silver handgun, but

which was in fact a novelty cigarette lighter shaped like a gun. A police armed response unit tracked him down to a nearby apartment block, where Bennett is alleged to have grabbed a passer-by and pointed the cigarette lighter at him, before turning it towards the two police officers. One of the officers then opened fire on Bennett.

According to witness Leon Smith, a student who lives a few yards from the scene of the shooting, "The police shot the dread [black man] twice in the chest, then they shouted to him to get down. Then they shot him a third time and a further two times after that". In fact six shots were fired and Bennett was hit in the chest five times.

Derek Bennett's parents said they were "saddened, angry, hurt and confused" by the shooting of their son. In a statement read by the family's solicitor Imran Khan, the Bennetts said: "Our son has left four young children who he loved dearly. He left three sisters and five brothers who loved him dearly. He was a lovely, friendly person who was the life and soul of our family. We want to know how this happened, why it happened and who is responsible. We want a full explanation from the authorities and an immediate apology."

These latest killings have highlighted the increasing preparedness of the British police to shoot first and ask question later. As Marie Kernan asked, "You don't kill somebody with a mental illness. What sort of society is that?" At least 13 have died at the hands of the police in the last six years.

Civil rights groups and others have questioned the police's reaction to telephone tip-offs. Harry Stanley was shot dead in September last year while carrying a table leg in a plastic bag. The police claimed to be responding to a phone call saying Stanley was carrying a gun. There have also been criticisms of the policy of shooting to kill, rather than to disable. Mike Yardley, a firearms specialist, explained, "The police are taught to

shoot to kill. They shoot for the centre of the chest. The idea is to instantaneously stop the suspect.” Marie Kernan’s lawyer said that police “should have shot [Andrew] elsewhere on the body.” Talking about the shooting of Derek Bennett, Roger Bingham of the civil rights organisation Liberty said, “The police have a duty to use minimum necessary force. This cannot just be about better weapons and training. The police must look to less harmful alternatives.”

Though understandable in the face of the escalating use of armed police response units, such arguments can inadvertently serve to fuel the call for greater repressive powers for the police. Home Secretary David Blunkett, for example, has expressed concern at the number of fatal shootings by police and is considering the introduction of non-fatal equipment such as tranquilliser guns. Were these to be brought in, there is no reason to believe that the number of fatal shootings would decline. It would be far more likely that the police would use stun weaponry in cases where up to now no weapons have been employed. Moreover many of the supposedly “non-fatal” weapons currently available (such as CS spray and gagging tape) have already led to deaths at the hands of the police.

In the face of widespread criticism and public concern, the London Mayor’s office, headed by Ken Livingstone, came forward with an apologia for the police action. Lee Jasper, senior policy adviser on policing to Livingstone, said of the Derek Bennett shooting, “Given the explosion of black gun crime within the black community our message to people is that if you are carrying a toy gun as a fashion accessory then that is a very dangerous thing to do.”

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