

New York police kill Brooklyn teen for pointing a fake gun

By Steve Light
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Sergio Reyes, an 18-year-old who lived in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn in New York City, was shot to death Sunday, February 19, by three plainclothes police from the 83rd Street precinct who claim he pointed what looked like a real gun at them. Police were patrolling on Starr Street near Irving Avenue shortly after a bodega store clerk called 911 reporting he was robbed at gunpoint. The pistol recovered at the scene, according to police, turned out to only shoot pellets, effectively a toy.

At least six gunshots were heard by a resident of the block, according to the *New York Times*. Reyes was pronounced dead at Woodhull Hospital with wounds to the torso. Officials released a picture from a surveillance camera in the store. It showed an individual in a dark sweatshirt and light pants pointing a black gun toward the store counter, but a hood blocks a view of the face. The boy's father, Antonio Tlapanco, 48, had a photograph taken at the hospital that showed bruising on his dead son's neck and questioned the circumstances of the shooting.

The Garden Deli and Grill was only a few blocks from where Reyes lived with his family. The parents had lived in Bushwick for over a decade, having come from Mexico, and all six of their children were born in the United States. Reyes was a senior at Leadership and Public Service High School in lower Manhattan and wanted to become a social worker.

"Every afternoon when he got home from school I inspected his backpack to make sure he was OK," Tlapanco said to the *Daily News*. "I do that with all my children. If I would have seen [the plastic gun], I would have corrected his actions. ... He was happy. He was looking forward to going to school. Now I lost him."

Police said he was trying to steal a six-pack of beer. The store clerk, Muhammed Ali, working there for six

years, said, "Young guys, they do this stuff. It's not even worth it, for the beer." He added that the bodega was one of hundreds of Yemeni-owned stores that closed on February 2 to protest President Trump's travel ban.

There have been 15 killings by police in the US since the beginning of the year, according a running tally kept by the *Guardian*. Just three days before Sergio Reyes was shot, on February 16, a 17-year-old boy, Kadeem Torres, was killed in an exchange of fire in the East New York section of Brooklyn. On January 4, another 18-year-old, Joshua Martino, was killed by police who said they saw a man firing a gun into a club in Brooklyn's Crown Heights Section. One day before that incident, police reported shooting a 63-year-old emotionally disturbed man who charged them with a knife in Canarsie, also in Brooklyn.

A string of shootings by police of people with fake guns has occurred in recent years. Most notably was the killing of 12-year-old Tamir Rice on November 22, 2014 in Cleveland, Ohio. Someone had called police saying that a male black was sitting on a swing at a playground and pointing a gun. Video showed Officer Timothy Loehmann firing his gun within two seconds of the police car arriving at the playground. A grand jury failed to indict Loehmann and the city of Cleveland settled a suit by Rice's family for \$6 million.

Robert Dentmond, a 16-year-old, had called police in Gainesville, Florida on March 3, 2016, warning that he planned to kill himself. He was killed by police within the hour in a parking lot, holding a toy gun. On September 15, 2016, 13-year-old Tyree King was killed by Columbus, Ohio police, who said Tyree had run into an alley while they were investigating an armed robbery and had pulled a BB gun from his waistband.

On February 12 of this year, police in Oregon shot two people within nine hours of each other, claiming both were armed with fake guns. Quanice Hayes, 17, was killed when police were looking for a black man wearing a hoodie. Dan Perkins, 56 and homeless, was wounded after he called police threatening suicide. He yelled, “Shoot me! Kill me!” when found in the park by the van he was living in, and was said to have a knife, according to Fox News. The three officers were placed on modified duty pending investigation.

Police and the media justified such actions as reasonable and legal self-defense. The *World Socialist Web Site* explained in “Police violence and the social crisis in America”: “In the videos that have come out of police killings, beatings and other atrocities, one is struck by the inhumanity of it all, the indifference to human life. It is not a matter fundamentally of individuals, but of the institutions of the state, that ‘body of armed men’ acting in defense of the ruling class, in which the combination of war and social inequality is expressed in homicidal behavior.”

Aside from the often false and malicious claims of the police as to the danger or violence they face, there is also the question of the conditions that give rise to a layer of youth who actually do carry guns, real or fake. There is no doubt that this can be attributed directly or indirectly to the fact that, as of 2014 (a figure that has been on an increasing trajectory), “about 15 million children in the United States—21 percent of all children—live in families with incomes below the federal poverty threshold, a measurement that has been shown to underestimate the “needs of families,” according to the National Center for Children in Poverty.

A report “Youth Disconnection in New York City” by the Social Science Research Council highlights an aspect of these conditions: “An astonishing one in every seven Americans ages 16 to 24 is neither working nor in school—5.8 million young people in all. As their peers lay the foundation for a productive, fulfilling adulthood, these disconnected youth find themselves adrift at society’s margins, unmoored from the structures that confer knowledge, skills, identity, and purpose. ... The rate of youth disconnection in the New York metro area ... is higher than the national average (15.2 percent compared to 14.7 percent nationally). And the New York metro area lags behind

other large American cities.”

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