

Police kill unarmed 22-year-old man in Vallejo, California

By Meenakshi Jagadeesan
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Police officers shot and killed an unarmed man in the parking lot of a Walgreens in Vallejo, California Tuesday, during the on-going wave of popular protests against police brutality around the United States and internationally.

Sean Monterrosa, a 22-year old resident of Vallejo, was gunned down by officers from inside an unmarked police cruiser while he was on his knees, with his arms in the air. Monterossa was unarmed, though officers claimed that they feared an object in his pocket—which turned out to be a hammer—was a gun.

At this point, the only details about the killing have come from the official police account and a press conference held by Police Chief Shawny Williams on Wednesday.

According to the police, in the early hours of Tuesday officers responded to a call about potential looting in a neighborhood Walgreens. They found about a dozen people in the parking lot, who immediately fled in two vehicles on seeing the police cruiser. Monterossa, dressed in a black hooded sweatshirt, appeared to have been left behind. He immediately went down on his knees and began raising his arms. According to Williams, an officer who drew up in a second, unmarked car “perceived a threat” at this moment and fired five shots into Monterossa through the windshield of the car. The young man was pronounced dead at the hospital shortly after.

While refusing to answer reporters’ questions about whether he thought the use of force was excessive, Williams waxed eloquent about the horrors of the “looting and burglaries” that had made Monday a “horrific night” for his department. The police, he said, had had to deal with an “orchestrated, organized assault on our city,” which is why they had welcomed the deployment of the National Guard.

The Vallejo Police Department has released no details about the officer responsible for the killing, other than to say that he was an “18 year veteran of the force” and that he had been placed on paid administrative leave. However, they seem to have no such hesitation about the victim. The department has let it be known that Monterrosa had criminal record and reviewed it in detail for the media.

Tried and tested though it might be, the right-wing tactic of blackening the reputation of a victim is particularly disgusting in this context. Even if Monterossa had a criminal record a mile-long, that does not in any shape or form justify his murder by police, who had no idea who he was while unloading bullets into him. The claim that armed officers, inside the safety of a car were somehow threatened by a lone man in a parking lot, who was on his knees and raising his arms up, is patently ridiculous. Making it a point to publicize the victim’s supposed criminal record is nothing short of grotesque.

The picture of Monterossa that has emerged from his family, friends and larger community is starkly different from that being painted by the police. The son of immigrants from Argentina, Monterossa was working as a security guard and a carpenter at the time of his killing. His father had been a surgeon in Argentina, and his mother a professional dancer. But they had settled into blue-collar work after migrating to the United States. Monterossa was committed to providing a better life for his parents and his friends and colleagues attest to his involvement in improving the lives of his community at large.

His two sisters told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that Monterossa had been falsely accused of a few petty crimes and stopped by the police in part because of the way he dressed and the fact that he was covered in

tattoos. But he did not have any prior record. In a grim irony, the last text he sent his sisters was asking them to sign a petition protesting against the police murder of George Floyd.

The Vallejo Police Department has a well-established track record of brutality and murder. In 2012, Vallejo officer Sean Kenney made national headlines when he shot and killed three people within five months. Kenney retired in 2019 in part because of his injuries from a 2017 incident, in which he shot and seriously injured Vallejo resident Kevin DeCarlo for supposedly ramming Kenney's unmarked police car. In February 2018, Vallejo Ofc. Ryan McMahon shot and killed Ronell Foster, after attempting to stop Foster for not having a light on his bicycle. In February 2019, six Vallejo officers fired dozens of shots at Willie McCoy, 20, an up and coming Bay Area rap artist, who was asleep in his car at a Taco Bell drive thru.

The fact that this latest murder has taken place in the context of the massive on-going protests against police brutality is chillingly telling. As Adante Pointer, a civil rights lawyer who has long represented Vallejo families, told the *Guardian*: "The eyes of the world are on policing and yet your officers still feel comfortable enough to shoot someone under what are the most questionable circumstances? If they could do this during the light of the George Floyd protests and world scrutiny, you can only imagine what they do in the dark of the night when no one is looking."

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