

Love, Life, and Loss – Case Overviews

Seven African-American Men: Victims of Police Violence



Kenneth Chamberlain - *"Why do you have your guns out?"*

Kenneth Chamberlain Sr. was fatally shot on November 19, 2011, in White Plains, New York. Chamberlain was a sixty-six year old former marine and corrections officer who had bipolar disorder, as well as arthritis and respiratory illness. After his LifeAid medical alert necklace was accidentally set off, triggering an alarm, police came to his home and demanded that he open his front door. Chamberlain informed them through the door that he did not need help and then asked them to leave. Despite his objections, the police broke down Chamberlain's door, tasered him, and then shot him. He died in surgery at the hospital not long after. Police claim he had approached them with a knife, but his family disputes this.

Trayvon Martin - *"What are you following me for?"*

On the evening of February 26, 2012, in Sanford, Florida, George Zimmerman fatally shot Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African American high school student. Zimmerman, a 28-year old Latino man, was the neighborhood watch coordinator for his gated community. Martin was there visiting his relatives at the time of the shooting. Zimmerman noticed Martin as he returned to the community after having walked to a nearby convenience store. Zimmerman called the Sanford police to report

him as a suspicious person. The dispatcher asked Zimmerman if he was following Martin, when Zimmerman responded, "Yeah," the dispatcher said, "We don't need you to do that," to which Zimmerman responded, "Okay." Nevertheless, he continued to follow Martin, and after ending his call with police, a violent encounter took place between Martin and Zimmerman, which ended when Zimmerman fatally shot Martin 70 yards from the rear door of the townhouse where Martin was staying.

What happened during the altercation is a matter of dispute. When police arrived at the scene, Zimmerman had a bloody and swollen nose, was bleeding from the back of his head, and his back was wet and soiled, as if he had been in grass. Zimmerman was charged with Martin's murder but acquitted at trial on self-defense grounds. The incident was reviewed by the Department of Justice for potential civil rights violations, but no additional charges were filed, citing insufficient evidence.

Amadou Diallo - "Mom, I'm going to college."

On February 4, 1999, Amadou Diallo, a 23-year-old immigrant from Guinea, was shot and killed by four New York City Police Department plain-clothed officers. Early that morning, Diallo was standing near his building after returning from a meal. At about 12:40 a.m., the police officers - Edward McMellon, Sean Carroll, Kenneth Boss, and Richard Murphy - passed by in a Ford Taurus. Carroll later testified that Diallo matched the general description of a serial rapist who had struck a year earlier, or that he might have been a lookout.

The officers testified that they identified themselves as NYPD officers, but a witness testified that the officers started shooting without warning. Diallo ran toward his apartment doorway at their approach, despite their shouts to stop and "show his hands." There was not much light, and Diallo reached into his jacket and withdrew his wallet. The officers opened fire when one shouted "Gun!." During the shooting, officer McMellon tripped and fell, causing the other officers to believe he had been shot. The four officers fired 42 shots, hitting Diallo 19 times. All four officers were charged with second-degree murder and acquitted at trial in Albany.

Michael Brown - "I don't have a gun. Stop shooting."

At 11:53, a.m. on August 9, 2014 a police dispatcher reported that someone had stolen a box of cigars at the Ferguson Market in Ferguson, Missouri, and described the suspect as a black male wearing a white t-shirt. A few minutes later, at 11:57 a.m., the dispatch described the suspect as wearing a red Cardinals hat, a white t-shirt, and khaki shorts, and that he was accompanied by another male. At 12:00 p.m., Officer Darren Wilson of the Ferguson Police radioed asking if his assistance was needed in searching for suspects. Seven seconds later, an unidentified officer said they had disappeared. Wilson called for backup at 12:02 p.m. saying he might have spotted them.

Shortly after that, Wilson drove up to Brown and a companion as they were walking in the middle of the street and ordered them to move off the street. Wilson continued driving past the two men but then backed up and stopped close to them. A struggle took place between Brown and Wilson through the window of the police SUV. Wilson's gun was fired twice from inside the vehicle, hitting Brown's right hand. Brown fled, and Wilson then got out of his vehicle and began to pursue Brown. At some point, Wilson fired his gun again, while facing Brown, and hit him with at least six shots. Brown was unarmed and died on the street. Less than 90 seconds passed from the time Wilson encountered Brown to the time of Brown's death.

Oscar Grant - "You shot me! You shot me!"

Oscar Grant III (1986-2009) was a young African-American man who was fatally shot early on New Year's Day 2009 by Bay Area Rapid Transit Police officer Johannes Mehserle in Oakland, California. Responding to reports of a fight on a crowded Bay Area Rapid Transit train returning from New Years festivities in San Francisco, BART Police officers detained Grant and several other passengers on the platform at the Fruitvale BART Station.

Officer Johannes Mehserle and another officer restrained Grant and forced him to lie face down on the platform. Mehserle was unable to remove Grant's right arm from under his body in order to handcuff him. Mehserle drew his pistol and shot Grant once in the back as he lay there immobilized. Mehserle later claimed that he had intended to use a Taser on him. Grant was unarmed. He was pronounced dead the next morning at Highland Hospital in Oakland. The events were captured on multiple official and private digital video and privately owned cell phone cameras. Owners disseminated their footage to media

outlets and to various websites, where it was watched millions of times. Both peaceful and violent protests took place in the days following.

John Crawford - *"It's not real."*

The shooting of John Crawford III occurred on August 5, 2014 in a Walmart in Beavercreek, Ohio. Crawford, a 22-year-old African-American man, picked up an un-packaged BB/pellet air rifle inside the store's sporting goods section and continued shopping in the store. Another customer, Ronald Ritchie, called 911. According to Ritchie at the time, Crawford was pointing the gun at people and at children walking by, and messing with the gun. Ritchie has since stated "At no point did he shoulder the rifle and point it at somebody", while maintaining that Crawford was "waving it around". Two officers of the Beavercreek Police arrived at the Walmart shortly after their dispatcher informed them of a "subject with a gun" in the pet supplies area of the store and shot Crawford. He was later pronounced dead at Dayton's Miami Valley Hospital.

The shooting was captured by the store's security video camera. The video shows Crawford talking on his cell phone while swinging the BB/Pellet air rifle when he was killed. According to Crawford's mother, the video shows the officers immediately fired without giving any verbal commands and without giving Crawford any time to drop the toy even if he had heard them.

Eric Garner - *"I can't breathe."*

On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner died in Staten Island, New York City, after a New York City Police Department (NYPD) officer put him in what has been described as a chokehold for about 15 to 19 seconds while arresting him. The New York City Medical Examiner's Office attributed Garner's death to a combination of a chokehold, compression of his chest, and poor health. NYPD policy prohibits the use of chokeholds.

NYPD officers approached Garner on suspicion of selling "loosies" (single cigarettes) from packs without tax stamps. After Garner told the police that he was tired of being harassed

and that he was not selling cigarettes, the officers went to arrest Garner. When officer Daniel Pantaleo tried to take Garner's wrist behind his back, Garner pulled his arms away. Pantaleo then put his arm around Garner's neck and took him down onto the ground. After Pantaleo removed his arm from Garner's neck, he pushed the side of Garner's face into the ground while four officers moved to restrain Garner, who repeated "I can't breathe" eleven times while lying facedown on the sidewalk. After Garner lost consciousness, officers turned him onto his side to ease his breathing. Garner remained lying on the sidewalk for seven minutes while the officers waited for an ambulance to arrive. The officers and EMTs did not perform CPR on Garner at the scene; according to a spokesman for the PBA, this was because they believed that Garner was breathing and that it would be improper to perform CPR on someone who was still breathing. He was pronounced dead at the hospital approximately one hour later.

Excerpts from *Glory*, by John Legend]

Hands to the Heavens, no man, no weapon
Formed against, yes glory is destined
Every day women and men become legends
Sins that go against our skin become blessings
The movement is a rhythm to us
Freedom is like religion to us
Justice is juxtapositionin' us
Justice for all just ain't specific enough
One son died, his spirit is revisitin' us
True and livin' livin' in us, resistance is us
That's why Rosa sat on the bus
That's why we walk through Ferguson with our hands up
When it go down we woman and man up
They say, "Stay down", and we stand up
Shots, we on the ground, the camera panned up
King pointed to the mountain top and we ran up

...

Selma is now for every man, woman and child
Even Jesus got his crown in front of a crowd
They marched with the torch, we gon' run with it now
Never look back, we done gone hundreds of miles
From dark roads he rose, to become a hero
Facin' the league of justice, his power was the people
Enemy is lethal, a king became regal
Saw the face of Jim Crow under a bald eagle

The biggest weapon is to stay peaceful
We sing, our music is the cuts that we bleed through
Somewhere in the dream we had an epiphany
Now we right the wrongs in history
No one can win the war individually
It takes the wisdom of the elders and young people's energy
Welcome to the story we call victory
The comin' of the Lord, my eyes have seen the glory

One day when the glory comes
It will be ours, it will be ours
One day when the war is won
We will be sure, we will be sure

Campaign Zero is a police reform campaign proposed by activists associated with Black Lives Matter, on a website that was launched on August 21, 2015. The plan consists of ten proposals, all of which are aimed at reducing police violence. The ten solutions are policy based and are summarized below:

- **End profiling and “stop and frisk;”** and establish alternative approaches to mental health crises.
- **Develop effective civilian oversight** of police, and remove barriers to reporting police misconduct.
- **Limit the use of force by police;** establish standards and reporting of police use of deadly force, improve local police department use of force policies, end traffic-related police killings and dangerous high-speed police chases, monitor how police use force and hold officers accountable for excessive force.
- **Independently investigate and prosecute police abuses;** lower the standard of proof for Department of Justice civil rights investigations, use federal funds to encourage independent investigations, establish a Special Prosecutor’s Office at the State level for police violence, and require independent investigations of all cases where police kill or seriously injure civilians.
- **Improve community representation;** increase the number of police officers who reflect the communities they serve, and use community feedback to inform police department policies and practices.

- **Use body cams/film the police.**
- **Train police more effectively;** provide rigorous and ongoing training, include training on “unconscious” or “implicit” racial bias.
- **End for-profit policing;** end police department quotas for tickets and arrests, limit fines/fees for low-income people, prevent police from taking the money or property of innocent people. Make police pay for their own misconduct.
- **Demilitarize the police;** end the federal government program providing military weaponry to local police departments, establish local restrictions to prevent police departments from purchasing or using military weaponry.
- **Provide fair police union contracts;** remove barriers to misconduct investigations and civilian oversight, keep officers’ disciplinary history accessible to police departments and the public, ensure financial accountability for officers and departments that kill or seriously injure civilians.

- **Sources**
Campaign Zero, *Solutions*, <https://www.joincampaignzero.org/solutions/#solutionsoverview>.