

Accountable to Themselves Alone: On Police Killings

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In 2017, at least 65 people in Canada were left dead through police encounters. In so-called British Columbia, in 2017 six people were left dead in encounters with police. The RCMP are the historic force of occupation, dispossession, and control for the Canadian state. RCMP across Canada killed 14 people in 2017. So far this year there have been at least 27 police-involved deaths, in under five months. Three of four people victimized by RCMP were in BC, including a man who was tased to death in Chilliwack in February.

Police do not need to justify their killings. They kill because they can. There is no mechanism for accountability when the state kills. Police are accountable only to police. And the social role of police, as a prop to systems of inequality, demands that they use lethal force as often as they see fit.

Open state violence remains a central feature of liberal democratic governing, even as myths of responsive, representational governance prevail. In liberal democracies, displays of state violence are necessary for the state to show the public that it still retains the monopoly on violence and to reinforce its claims on legitimacy for this monopoly, while treating these fundamentals as exceptional moments that differentiate liberal democracies from colonized and formerly colonized countries that are the targets of an international form of Canadian military force. Open displays of force also serve to show who can be subjected to violence—the poor, working class, racialized people, the unemployed, etc. Police killings offer a hard (re)ordering of social structure and status.

March 19th in South Surrey

On March 19, a man died after going into medical distress during an arrest in South Surrey involving members of the RCMP and Vancouver Police Department (VPD). Surrey RCMP report receiving multiple calls about a man apparently in some distress in the roadway near the intersection of 10 Avenue and 161A Street around 1:40 PM.

According to a media release by the Independent Investigations Office of BC, the agency that examines cases of police harm to civilians in British Columbia, the man went into medical crisis when RCMP “tried to gain control and take him into custody.” The man had reportedly first been confronted by an off-duty VPD officer. Emergency Health Services arrived and attempted to provide aid but the man was declared dead around 3 PM.

Once again the question must be asked: why were the police sent to interact with someone in personal distress who posed no threat to the public? And what role did the off-duty VPD officer play in confronting (or escalating) the situation?

May 8th in Nanaimo

On May 8, RCMP and Island District Emergency Response Team officers were involved in shooting and killing a man at the Departure Bay ferry terminal in Nanaimo. Initial reports, which have not been independently confirmed, suggest that RCMP officers were attempting to arrest a man who was suspected in a car theft in another part of the province. The vehicle was reportedly stopped and the man allegedly exited when he was shot by police. He later died of the injuries inflicted by police.

One witness, former Saanich mayor Frank Leonard, who was waiting to board the ferry at the time of the killing, told CBC News that he heard several, perhaps as many as eight, shots fired.

Another witness, Ed Pearce, a former West Vancouver police officer, saw the police operation unfold and also reported hearing as many as eight shots. He also said he heard a loud bang and looked over to see a vehicle being rammed by what he believed was an Emergency Response Team vehicle. He reports that he then heard a “huge explosion” that he said sounded like a flash or stun grenade. Other witnesses also reported hearing the loud explosion.

Police killings continue

While writing this article police in Canada killed two more people. These include the shooting of Bradley Thomas Clattenburg by RCMP officers in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia and the shooting of an unnamed man in Summerside, Prince Edward Island over the weekend of May 26–27.

Some hold out hope that oversight agencies, like the Independent Investigations Office in BC, can reign in police violence or hold police accountable. This is a false hope that has never been realized and *cannot* be realized in the context of a capitalist state that needs police violence to maintain its unjust, unequal social order. The state protects the state first and foremost.

Police oversight bodies are not truly independent, relying on officers for training or even for investigative work (as in Quebec). The IIO is trained by cops at the Justice Institute. Numerous studies have shown police to be uncooperative, to harass investigators, to intimidate agencies, and to interfere with investigations. Because they can. And they are protected in doing so; Investigative units have no power to compel police to testify or to participate in the process in ways they do not want to. Police control evidence at scenes of their killings and control the flow of information.

Despite regularly murdering people, police are being funded, resourced, and deployed instead of and in place of other, necessary social services (that actually are services) like health care, social assistance, education, and social housing. People who are the most vulnerable in society are also most in need of these services – people who are Indigenous, poor, working class, homeless, drug-using, undocumented, sex working, trans, immigrants, and so on – are also those who most often have the cops sicced on them in place of being offered the resources they need. Victims of police violence are deemed disposable simply because they have been stigmatized and dehumanized, whether its because they’re “on something”, “crazy”, racialized, or just plain poor.

It is in this way that we can understand how a man experiencing some distress in South Surrey who sought help could find himself surrounded and set upon by police instead, with his death later justified by the very distress that had him seeking assistance in the first place.

The police and the common-sense belief that we need them or that they protect people, rather than property and the ruling classes, serve as a mechanism of social control, designed to pathologize and kill people who are considered disposable on account of their vulnerability. Every time the police murder another person, they justify the belief that criminalized populations deserve death. No amount of oversight or reform will ever untether the police from their role as protectors of a capitalist and colonial state.

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