

# The Media Underestimate Police Brutality

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*Police Brutality, 2004*

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"Don't trust everything you read in the papers." This expression has become a proverb. Nowhere is it more true than in dealing with media reports of police killings. For several years, I've been browsing mainstream news media websites for stories about police killings, beatings, [racism](#), and corruption. What I've learned is that the media report the *fact* of police killings, but not *the facts*.

## Police Brutality Is Not an Aberration

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Killings and shootings by the police are considered newsworthy on a par with traffic fatalities or yesterday's weather. Many reports are word-for-word transcripts of press statements by the police department involved. Few reporters bother to talk independently with witnesses, or to interview the family of the victim as they do with victims of other crimes. If they do report on the victims, it's often to dehumanize and criminalize them. To the mainstream media, with rare exceptions, police killings are an unfortunate necessity. Victims of police violence generally have only themselves to blame. Police abuse is an aberration.

But the beating of Rodney King, the torture of Abner Louima were no aberrations. The killings of Amadou Diallo in NY, Tyisha Miller in Riverside, [California], Malice Green in Detroit, Jonny Gammage in Pittsburg, Margaret Mitchell in LA, LaTanya Haggerty in Chicago were not aberrations. [Police brutality](#) is not an aberration—it's an epidemic, and its systemic! In failing to treat it as such, the media are failing in their responsibility to the truth and to their communities. But they are carrying out their responsibilities to their corporate owners, to the same economic and political elites that the police themselves serve and protect.

The role of the media in this regard is well-illustrated in the coverage of three ... killings—the shooting deaths of Tyisha Miller in Riverside, Ricardo Clos by LA sheriff's deputies, and Margaret Laverne Mitchell by LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department]. We should also consider the treatment of extremely high profile cases, championed by community-based demonstrators, such as those of Abner Louima and Amadou Diallo in New York.<sup>1</sup>

## A Character Assassinated by the Media

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Tyisha Miller, a young Black woman, was fired on dozens of times, and pierced by at least 11 bullets, killed by four members of the Riverside police just before New Year's. After months of foot dragging, the District Attorney ruled the killing "justifiable," an unfortunate tragedy in which there was no criminal behavior by the police, only "errors of judgment." Thereby, the DA prevented jurors from determining if

the cops were criminally responsible in the shooting death of a semi-conscious woman they had been called to help. In response, the *Riverside Press Enterprise* ran a story that was practically written by the police. It made Tyisha, the victim, appear the villain of the incident.

AP headlined the story, "Report: Teen killed by Riverside police was a gun-toting street tough." The opening paragraph states: "The teenager whose killing by Riverside police stirred racial tensions was a gun-toting street tough with a violent reputation, according to police documents." Note how the headline and the opening paragraph carefully refer to Tyisha Miller only as a "teen" and a "street tough," and her gender is studiously ignored. In fact, she is left nameless, to drive home the dehumanizing cop propaganda message that she was just another gang-banger who deserved what she got from the cops. This is further evidence that, as noted by [comedian and [human rights](#) activist] Dick Gregory, Tyisha's killing was about adding Black Women to the 'justifiable homicide' target list along with young Black men.

The story goes on to say, "Tyisha Miller, portrayed by her family as a carefree, outgoing choir girl who died unjustly in a hail of police bullets, actually played the part of a gang member who intimidated and brawled with others, according to the documents." The evident implication is that the family's portrait of Tyisha is a falsehood, and the police are telling the real story. Thus her death in a hail of police bullets was not unjust, after all!

The newspaper report goes on, "In the documents, police and school officials said she dressed and acted like a gang-banger, that she had some connection to the West Side Project Crips, and that she was suspected of beating two girls in the past year." This blatant, unsubstantiated character assassination is hardly worthy of analysis except that it's being used to portray four killer cops as community saviors, saving innocent victims from the scourge of Tyisha Miller! "Dressed like a gang-banger!" Strike one! "Connection to the Crips!" Strike two! "Suspected of a beating!" Strike three! Come the cops as judges, jury and executioners—bang, you're dead!

At this point in the article it states, "The Rev. Bernell Butler, a cousin of Ms. Miller's who has acted as an unofficial spokesman for her family, was angry about some information in the Police Department report." Implicitly, this says that the family, which is angry about "some" of the information, does not and cannot challenge "most" of the "information."

"In January 1998, Ms. Miller was charged with battery," the story goes on, "after a student told police she was jumped on her way home from Rubidoux High by Ms. Miller, seven other females and one male." Was there any disposition or adjudication of this charge filed a full year before Tyisha's execution? Did Tyisha ever go to court, or were the charges dismissed? As nothing more is said, we can conclude the charges were probably dropped (but they'd rather not say so openly to preserve the case against Tyisha). The newspaper goes on, "In September, Assistant Principal Sharon Dimery said Ms. Miller came in to enroll another girl in the school. But Dimery believed Ms. Miller was there to beat up a student and had Ms. Miller and the girl escorted off campus." Of course, Tyisha herself is no longer with us to defend herself against Ms. Dimery's 'belief,' for which no supporting evidence is offered. Even if all these allegations are true, what's their relevance, except to cast Tyisha, *post mortem*, beyond the pale of human concern?

"Last August," the story continues, "a 17-year-old girl told police Ms. Miller beat her with a Club—a metal anti-auto theft device ..., police said." Were charges filed? Was Tyisha arrested, let alone convicted? Apparently not. But these unsubstantiated rumors, while not sufficiently sound to be the basis of criminal charges, are handy ammunition for the police to use to paint Tyisha as the criminal, not the victim of police criminality, and for the media to dutifully reprint and broadcast. In a court, Tyisha would have had a chance to confront and cross-examine her accuser. In the court of public opinion, orchestrated by the police with the connivance of the media, the accuser is nameless and unchallenged, while Tyisha is vilified.

The Coalition Against Media Exploitation noted that the DA and the press reports "said virtually nothing about the behavior or background of the four officers who shot Miller." According to Earl Ofari Hutchinson, the Coalition called on the Press-Enterprise to print a balanced story on Miller's life based on complete interviews with friends, family members, school officials, and co-workers. They also demanded that the newspaper request that police release full details on the background and behavior of the four officers involved in the Miller shooting and publish the details in a feature story. Neither of these demands has been met.

## Ignoring a Tragedy

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If the media treatment of Tyisha Miller's killing .... December [1999] requires a close reading and analysis to understand the propaganda techniques being used, the coverage of the killing of Ricardo Clos by L.A. Sheriff's deputies in February [1999] is more easily handled. Clos was a mentally distressed Mexicano man, whose wife called 911 for police help when he cut himself on the neck. The deputies arrived on the scene, and confronted the agitated and possibly suicidal man with a knife. When he threw the knife at them—in other words, after he was disarmed—the deputies fired 38 times at Clos, killing him instantly.

This killing happened after those of Miller in Riverside and Amadou Diallo in New York, in which multiple-gunshot killings of people of color by white cops were making big national and local headlines. How did the *LA Times*, the local newspaper of record, treat this story of yet another multiple-gunshot killing by [law enforcement](#) officers in their own local bailiwick? They ignored it! Not one word—no headline, no briefs, no photo with a caption, appeared in the *Times*. The Associated Press wires carried a one paragraph story, essentially a press release from the sheriff's department, which carefully said only that "the number of shots that hit [Clos] was not yet ascertained by the coroner's office." No mention was made of the number of shots that had been fired! What could be more newsworthy than another killing by law enforcement locally, firing 38 times at a distressed man in response to a call for help by his wife? Yet amazingly, this story did not merit a single line of type in the *LA Times*. Only *La Opinion*, LA's Spanish-language daily, 50% owned by the *Times*, carried an account of the killing, and only in any depth after a march and rally conducted by the Brown Berets to the East LA Sheriff's station.

Could this glaring lack of coverage by LA media be related to the fact that Clos was not Black, but Mexicano, and that the powers-that-be were intent upon keeping a lid on things in LA when NY, the country's other media capital, was being wracked by [demonstrations](#) and civil disobedience over the killing of Diallo? How else to account for the complete silence about this story? Perhaps the media will

claim that the killing did not provoke the kind of public protest that made it an on-going story, as the Diallo and Miller killings did. But if so, the press would stand condemned by its own excuses, acknowledging that in fact it never independently covers police abuses, and that—as is in fact the case—most police killings go virtually unreported.

Clos's death, which stands out because it missed even the single obligatory paragraph or two on the page of metro briefs in the *LA Times*, is thus much closer to the rule than the exception represented by Diallo and Miller. It is this vast majority of under-reported cases that allow the press to treat the few exceptional cases deemed news-worthy as "aberrations." For example, the same week that Abner Louima, a Haitian immigrant, was tortured by the NYPD, six other Black men, mostly unarmed, were shot and killed by police in Bell Gardens near LA, in Chicago, Baltimore, and several other cities around the U.S. But even though a mini-rebellion greeted the Baltimore police killing, these killings were not even mentioned in the extensive press coverage around the Louima atrocity. This allowed his torture to be treated as an isolated case, rather than a window into on-going police racism, abuse and criminality.

## Stilling the Voice of Dissent

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The third killing whose coverage we should consider is the police shooting of Margaret Laverne Mitchell, a Black homeless woman in her 50's, by the LAPD. The *LA Times*, in seeking to explain why the killing did not galvanize Los Angeles as the Amadou Diallo shooting had roused New York City, printed a commentary by Joe Domanick. He's a police critic, an alternative journalist, and the host of a public affairs show on KFPK-FM, the local Pacifica affiliate. Domanick proposed there was less social tinder to ignite in LA than NY. He wrote that "shootings have been going down [in L.A.], not up, since 1992, most radically since [Black police chief Bernard] Parks [who had strongly defended the cops in the Mitchell killing] became chief in 1996. In 1992, the year of the [riots](#)," Domanick went on, "21 people were killed and 54 wounded by police gunfire. A year later, the number was 15 killed, 48 wounded. In 1998, it dropped to 11 killed ... and for the first five months of this year, only four people have been killed and four wounded by police fire."

"Only four people killed" in five months! What a wonderful improvement! This bit of statistical flummery is astounding, more so because it comes from a journalistic 'critic' of the police, rather than a more typical apologist for them. 1992 was one of the worst years for police killings in recent LA history, almost double the "normal" average over many years of about one killing a month. Yet only by taking this high water mark as a base point is Domanick able to argue that killings have "fallen." So in fact eleven shooting deaths by the cops [in 1998], and "only four in five months" in 1999 is about one killing off the city's 'normal' average! And this is over several years that the [crime](#) rate and arrest rate have been dropping dramatically overall! Not to mention the killings by the sheriff's department, and the numerous other police agencies in the vicinity.

It's bad enough that the city politicians treat these killings as the "cost of doing business." It's worse when even the "anti-brutality" forces and the media demonstrate the same complacency. There were in fact a string of rallies and meetings, drawing out diverse constituencies, over the Mitchell killing, admittedly not on the level of the protests over the killing of Amadou Diallo. The real problem in LA has always been unifying the communities that do come out. Gays and lesbians demonstrate about police

harassment of gay bars. Latinos protest the killings or beatings of Chicanos and Mexicanos. Blacks come out over police abuse and shootings of Black folks. There was a homeless rally over the Mitchell killing. Rarely if ever does everyone come out at the same time in the same place about the same case. And the media, by refusing to draw out the systematic connections, by in fact suppressing even the report of cases like Ricardo Clos that might outrage Mexicanos at the same time that Blacks are burning over the case of Amadou Diallo, serve to perpetuate this divide and conquer strategy.

Joe Domanick also reports in his *LA Times* piece, as a "positive sign" that "[i]n the early 1990s, pepper spray was used about 30 times a year to subdue combative suspects. More recently, its use has risen sixteenfold. At the same time, baton use is way down. In the early 1990s, batons were used about 500 times a year. Today, they are employed about 30 times a year. That's a positive sign in terms of reducing injuries."

Again, remarkably, a 'police critic' seems to be lauding the police use of pepper spray 480 times a year! Unbelievable—all the cops have done, by these exact statistics, is to swap pepper spray for night-sticks, and pepper spray is probably responsible for more fatalities than batons have been. Yet this is a "positive sign" to Domanick! And remember, this is not a police puff piece by a media flack for the LAPD—this is a critique by a Pacifica public affairs broadcaster, published author of a book critical of the LAPD's history of militarism, and a regularly published alternative journalist, who appears in *LA Weekly* more often than in the *LA Times*.

## Serving the Same Master

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The mainstream media consider these killings yesterday's fish-wrap, or perhaps, like the *Washington Post*, will report on a pattern of abuse years after the fact. That's because they serve the same corporate interests as the police do. The police function as an occupying army in communities of color and an internal border guard in more privileged neighborhoods, based on the realities of capitalism and colonialism. The problem is not only [police misconduct](#), but police conduct, as enforcers of a racist and sexist status quo. Corporate news media serve the same masters and the same system by providing diversion and propaganda to lull people into acquiescence.

One final aspect of media coverage of police abuse issues should be noted. The news media tend to portray opponents of police brutality as grand-standing opportunists, professional agitators with no concern for the facts, or clowns. As Rev. Al Sharpton noted when NYPD Officer Volpe pleaded guilty to shoving a stick up Abner Louima's rectum and then down his throat, "Do you [reporters] still think we are exaggerating?" Simultaneously, of course, the media promote these self-same spokes-people, while silencing more radical or grassroots voices. [\[Civil rights leader\]](#) Jesse Jackson is sure to get coverage for a march, but the people doing community organizing on the ground, the people doing CopWatch projects as direct vigilance against police abuse on a street level, the outraged families of the victims who are reaching out to each other, are rarely heard from.

Years ago, a progressive radio journalist in San Francisco used to sign off by saying, "If you didn't like today's news, go out and make some of your own." This is the real answer to the problem of slanted media coverage, not only of police brutality, but of all issues of oppression and exploitation. We need to make our own news, and create our own news media.

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## Footnotes

1. Louima, a Haitian immigrant, was beaten and sodomized in a New York City police precinct house, on August 9, 1997. Diallo, a West African immigrant, was killed after New York City [police officers](#) fired forty-one shots while he stood in his Bronx doorway on February 4, 1999.

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