

Texas Prison Death Highlights Police Violence in America

By [Andre Damon](#)

Global Research, July 18, 2015

[World Socialist Web Site](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

On the week marking the one-year anniversary of the killing of Eric Garner in Staten Island, and nearing the anniversary of the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, yet another case of police violence has emerged that is in some respects even more troubling.

28-year-old Sandra Bland was found dead in a Waller County, Texas jail cell Monday, after being pulled over for changing lanes without using a traffic signal three days earlier. The police and local medical examiner claim that Bland, who was a vocal opponent of police violence, had hung herself with a trash bag.

Bystander video released Wednesday shows police violently arresting Bland as she complains that officers had slammed her head into the ground. Another officer demands that a bystander stop filming the brutal incident. Bland was arrested for the “assault of a public servant,” and police claim that force was justified in her arrest because she was “uncooperative.”

Prior to her highly suspicious death, Bland had participated in demonstrations against police violence and had made statements on the Internet highly critical of the police. “In the news that we’ve seen as of late, you could stand there, surrender to the cops, and still be killed,” Bland wrote in an eerily prophetic Facebook post prior to her death.

While the media refuses to raise the issue directly, the question arises whether, as an activist and participant in demonstrations against police violence, Bland may have been targeted for harassment and ultimately murder by the police.

Family members and friends cast doubt on the official police story, saying they had no indication that Bland would consider killing herself. “I talked to her Friday and she was in good spirits,” Bland’s friend LaVaughn Mosely told a local news station. She added “Although she was incarcerated she was in good spirits. She was looking forward to posting bond Saturday and getting out. So you don’t go from that to hanging yourself.”

Mosley added, “I can’t understand how somebody from a routine traffic stop can end up in jail and dead three days later.”

In a letter sent Thursday to the director of the Texas Department of Public Safety, Texas State Senator Royce West called the death of Bland “suspicious.”

He wrote, “My unconfirmed information is that Ms. Bland... was followed some distance by a DPS trooper and stopped her vehicle.” He also noted that

“the person who recorded the video was told by one of the officers to stop doing so, although it does not appear that he was in any way interfering with the officers in the execution of the traffic stop and appeared to be recording from a reasonable distance.”

West concluded his letter by requesting the release of any audio or visual recordings of Bland’s arrest and subsequent detainment. On Friday, *USA Today* reported that the FBI had joined in the investigation of Bland’s death.

That same day, the Texas Department of Public Safety said that Bland’s arrest “violated the department’s procedures regarding traffic stops and the department’s courtesy policy,” and the officer who pulled her over had been put on desk duty.

The violent arrest and suspicious death of Sandra Bland comes amid a string of nationwide revelations of police violence and murder.

* On Tuesday, a federal judge ordered the release of dashboard camera footage of the police killing of Ricardo Diaz Zeferino in 2013 in southern California. The video shows officers shooting an unarmed and defenseless Zeferino, who did nothing to threaten officers.

* Last weekend, four hundred people protested the killing of Jonathan Sanders, an unarmed Mississippi man who was killed after being put in a 20-minute chokehold, according to witnesses.

* On July 11, 35-year-old Anthony Ware died in Tuscaloosa, Alabama after being pepper-sprayed and handcuffed by police. Despite police claims that he had a gun, no weapon was found near his body.

* On July 9, a woman in Etowah County, Alabama filed a lawsuit alleging that a police officer fired a Taser at her daughter three times while she was having a seizure, causing her to lose consciousness.

630 people have been killed by police so far this year, according to killedbypolice.net, or more than three per day. In this month alone, 72 people have been killed by police officers.

These killings have taken place as police forces are increasingly asserting their own privileges and social interests against both the public and elected authorities. This fact was on display last week, when Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake acquiesced to police pressure to fire Baltimore police commissioner Anthony Batts. His removal came after the Baltimore Police union released a report condemning his supposedly insufficiently violent response to demonstrations in April.

This followed the virtual mutiny of police officers in New York City late last year after Mayor Bill De Blasio made statements that the police saw as insufficiently deferential. De Blasio responded to displays of insubordination by officers and police officials by calling for an end to protests against police violence and announcing the expansion of the New York Police Department, including the hiring of 300 officers for a new unit, equipped with “long rifles” and “machine guns” and “designed for dealing with events like our recent protests,” as Police Commissioner William Bratton put it.

Against this backdrop, the *Wall Street Journal* reported Wednesday that the ten US cities with the largest police departments have made payouts totaling in the millions of dollars to

hush up civil cases of police violence and murder. These cities paid out some \$248.7 million in settlements related to police violence in 2013, up 48 percent from \$168.3 million in 2010.

In the latest of these settlements, New York City paid \$5.9 million to settle charges related to the killing of Eric Garner, who was choked to death by officer Daniel Pantaleo last June, then denied emergency medical aid. The killing of Garner triggered mass popular protests against police violence, which gained strength following the August killing of unarmed teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.

These multi-million-dollar settlements are an attempt to continue the cover-up of police murder and violence. In the case of Eric Garner, the city sought to prevent any public discussion of the fraudulent grand jury proceeding that exonerated his killer. Last month, the *New York Times* reported that during the secretive grand jury proceeding, the prosecutor coached witnesses to not refer to police use of a "chokehold," despite clear medical evidence that choking contributed to Garner's death.

The total settlements paid out by the cities covered by the *Wall Street Journal* report amount to more than \$1 billion over the past five years. The enormous growth in such payouts is an expression of the virtual institutionalization of police violence and murder, and the unlimited lengths to which the state will go to defend the police.

The increasingly ubiquitous role of police violence in the United States is the reflection of far deeper social processes, including the growth of social inequality, the ceaseless assault on the living standards of the working class, and the dismantling of democratic forms of rule.

The de facto immunity given to the police, even as they carry out flagrant brutality and murder, shows the buildup of the forces of the state aimed at intimidating and suppressing any political opposition to militarism, economic inequality and social injustice.

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