

“POLICE CONDUCT AND ACCOUNTABILITY”

Thursday, September 5, 2013

Torontonians were saddened and concerned by the police shooting death of 18-year-old Sammy Yatim on a streetcar in downtown Toronto. Were it not for several smartphone videos shot by “citizen journalists” at the scene, the public would not even be aware of the disproportionately brutal response from the officer who fired nine bullets in 15 seconds, followed by a Taser. What is most regrettable is community groups, particularly the Urban Alliance on Race Relations, have spent years working with the Toronto Police Services on policies to avoid this very kind of tragedy. This statement reflects analysis by UARR and labour activists on the issue.

The public has high expectations of the Toronto Police Service. In confrontations of this kind — a confused youth with a pen-knife facing several police with weapons drawn — the use of effective and well-known de-escalation strategies should have been the first option. Force — preferably non-lethal — should have been the last resort. The police can and must do better to “Serve and Protect” the residents of this diverse city.

The shooting of Sammy Yatim by Constable James Forcillo will be a stern test of the system of police accountability and oversight as the Special Investigations Unit (SIU) conducts its investigation. We urge the police to co-operate fully with the SIU if they seek to restore public confidence.

This killing also has rekindled painful memories of similar killings in Toronto that often involved racialized men, some of whom faced mental-health issues. Back in June 2000, the Urban Alliance on Race Relations, in collaboration with the then Queen Street Patients Council, organized a conference called *Saving Lives: Alternatives to the Use of Lethal Force by Police* at the Law Society of Upper Canada.

The use of non-lethal technology and “mobile crisis teams”; supports for people facing mental-health issues; the role of race in police shootings; barriers to change, community policing, transparency and accountability were all identified in the final report. These were, in fact, acknowledged in subsequent Ontario policing standards. Implementation, though, has been a problem. It appears there is still no firm commitment to training police on how to deal with the unique and exceptional circumstances presented by confrontations with members of vulnerable groups. This is at the heart of the systemic breakdown in police behaviour.

The strong reaction from across the political spectrum shows that this incident has triggered intense concern: ranging from memories of the police conduct during the G20, to the preponderance of racialized people dying in similar incidents, to the conviction rate of black youth within the criminal justice system. Confidence in the police has taken a real blow, and much needs to be done to achieve a state of accountable community policing in Canada’s largest city.