

# South Whitehall police shooting stirs fear, anger

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## FULL TEXT

Someone sent me the video as my wife and I were driving home from York Sunday night.

I watched on my phone and was horrified, as so many other people were. Here was a man being shot down by a police officer, on video and in front of busy traffic along Hamilton Boulevard, and there was no indication he had a weapon.

One moment he was approaching the police car. Then ...BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM BLAM! He was down.

Videos of the shooting show that a police officer fired five shots when Joseph Santos, 44, of Hasbrouck Heights, N.J., failed to follow his repeated commands to "get on the ground!" and kept approaching.

The South Whitehall officer was dispatched at about 5:45 p.m. after a caller reported "suspicious activity" in the area of Hamilton Boulevard and Lincoln Avenue.

"Caller reported a male jumping on cars in front of Dorney Park. Hispanic male with blue shirt and shorts. Male is bleeding from his arm," a dispatcher said. The man had damaged some vehicles, according to later reports. Once the officer got there and saw what was happening, he called for backup, citing a possible "mental issue."

The first reaction, for me and many others, was: For this, a man should be shot dead?

About 30 people gathered in Allentown Monday night to discuss their fears. Some parents of children who are black, Hispanic or have mental health issues said they're concerned for their children going out in the community because of this and other shootings involving police officers.

Several groups were scheduled to unite for a protest Wednesday evening at the site of the shooting.

Before I use this as a jumping-off point for thoughts about race, police shootings and more, I want to preach caution regarding *this* shooting.

This has been ruled a homicide, and state police and the Lehigh County district attorney's office are investigating whether the shooting was justified.

Until that investigation is completed, including toxicology results and other information on what may have been happening with this victim, we need to reserve judgment.

Those of us who haven't worn a police uniform, who haven't faced the unpredictability of people who are mentally ill, impaired by substance abuse or deeply angry for other reasons, can't begin to imagine what it's like to have that person coming toward you or appearing to threaten the safety of innocent bystanders.

Are they armed? Are they powerful enough to cause real harm, even without a weapon?

Some of these life and death decisions have to be made in an instant. Some of them, in retrospect, are wrong.

Certainly, on the surface, this shooting looks questionable. But it's much too early to pronounce judgment.

That said, I can't help thinking that the prevalence of cellphones, annoying and even dangerous as they can be in all kinds of ways, is a blessing.

Their videos make it so hard to get away with anything, particularly in any kind of public setting.

Harassing black people at a public or private swimming pool? Berating Spanish-speaking people in a restaurant?

Calling police on black people—even children—for the most innocent, mundane activities?

You're busted. Before you know it, thanks to that viral video that just went out over Twitter or Facebook, you're in a place where everybody knows your name and your face—and they're all telling you what a creep you are. You may even lose your job.

If this hasn't had a chilling effect yet, it will. Bigots, keep your ugly thoughts to yourselves or risk the viral consequences.

Just as positive has been the way these videos help at least some white people understand what people of color have understood all along —that throughout their lives, they're treated with suspicion and fear, if not hostility, just because of the color of their skin.

Whatever some politicians and judges are telling you about where we are in the quest for racial equality, we're not there yet. We've made progress, certainly. But there's still a long way to go, and not just in the Deep South.

The most dramatic examples, of course, have been cellphone videos of police shootings in which the victims were people of color.

The same suspicion, fear and hostility we're still finding in the general population is a factor in some of these shootings, where people lose their lives for offenses that in some cases warrant nothing more than a citation.

I'll never forget the emotional wallop of "Daily Show" host Trevor Noah's reaction to a "not guilty" verdict delivered last year for a Minnesota policeman who fatally shot a black man during a traffic stop for a broken tail light.

Then newly released dash cam footage showed a police stop in which the driver, in the car with his family, told the officer he had a gun and appeared to be following his instructions.

Suddenly, the officer panicked, firing seven times at the man as his girlfriend and her little daughter watched.

Horried as Noah had been by the verdict, he said, "When I watched this video, it broke me."

He said, ""Forget race. Are we all watching the same video? The video where a law-abiding man followed the officer's instructions to the letter of the law and was killed regardless? People watched that video and then voted to acquit?"

He said many black people had assumed that if these cases just could get before juries instead of being swept under the rug by the authorities, justice could be done.

"It's one thing to have the system against you ..."he said. "But when a jury of your peers, your community, sees this evidence and decides that even this is self-defense, that is truly depressing.

"Because what they're basically saying is, in America it is officially reasonable to be afraid of a person just because they are black."

I am not saying that any of this came into play in what happened to Joseph Santos. And I'm certainly not trying to impugn the attitudes and behavior of local police, who have no history of such overreactions and, in my experience, have overwhelmingly shown themselves to be conscientious professionals.

But in the face of this national onslaught of ugly cellphone and dash cam videos, surely you can understand why some people of color aren't ready to declare this a society that is color blind.

Or, for them, even safe.

***Bill White's commentary appears Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays.***

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Credit: Bill White

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