

Lead by example

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The Sean Bell case is 50 shots too many.

There was a time when I would try to stick up for police officers. My late grandfather, Warren Brown, was in law enforcement for 35 years in Cleveland, Ohio. He was a detective in the juvenile unit and was highly respected in the community he policed. As far as my own experiences, I've never had any altercations with cops. When I had the unfortunate experience of being mugged one night on my way to a party in Harlem, I found the investigating officers to be extremely sympathetic and professional. When I got pulled over for speeding on a few occasions, I never received an obnoxious or cold reprimand. But, unfortunately, my interactions are a far cry from those of my two brothers, my male cousins, and male friends — all of whom have something in common. They are all black men.

Sean Bell and Amadou Diallo were also black men, who were gunned down in a spray of bullets by police officers. Fifty shots were fired in Bell's case, 41 shots in Diallo's. How many for the next? And that question must be asked because there will definitely be another tragic killing, as long as policemen continue to perceive black males as suspects. The Diallo case is closed. It is now common knowledge that the police got it wrong when they cornered Diallo. One of the four cops who was indicted testified that Diallo had matched the profile of a wanted rapist and had reached for what they believed was a gun. It turned out to be a wallet. And Diallo, a hardworking immigrant from West Africa, was unarmed.

Although a jury acquitted all four cops in the case, New York City later reached a \$3 million settlement with Diallo's family, who had filed a wrongful death civil suit.

There are still no answers for the Bell case. In fact, it has yet to yield indictments. But what is known is that Bell was unarmed, and no weapon was found on him or in his car. We also know that one officer alone fired 31 times. There have been protests around Manhattan led by civil rights leader Reverend Al Sharpton. New York Mayor Bloomberg said in a news conference right after the shooting that the "50-odd shots fired" were "unacceptable or inexplicable" but noted need for an investigation to "find out what really happened."

What needs to be said is that this latest shooting death was excessive, an egregious example of police brutality by the NYPD, and an honest snapshot of the way some officers treat blacks in urban communities. Because no charges have been made yet, the identities of some of the officers involved in the Bell case have yet to be revealed. Although the cops include two blacks and a Hispanic, I fail to see the significance. Police brutality is police brutality, and whether or not an officer is black or white, there is still an unspoken trend that allows cops of all colors to get away with aggressively interacting with black males.

My grandfather policed Cleveland's Eastside, a predominantly black, lower-income community. He investigated gang activity, picked up truants and thieves. He also drove around in an unmarked car, and he wore plain clothes. My grandfather was proud to be a detective, and he earned the respect of the community by setting an example. He was a professional, not a bully. And perhaps that's what went awry in the cases of Amadou Diallo and Sean Bell. If the officers involved respected Diallo or Bell as human beings, not as guilty black male suspects, then maybe those men would still be alive.

My grandfather had to interact with violent youths, and he also had to turn the other cheek when the "N-word" and racial jokes were part of the everyday locker room banter. There were times when his job was stressful, dangerous, and tense. For sure, the undercover officers in the Bell case have been in stressful situations themselves. But my grandfather didn't take his anxiety and anger out on the people he was paid to protect and to serve. He respected them. My grandfather never fired 31 shots at an unarmed person. And he never killed anyone. What a shame that the officers in the Bell and Diallo cases can't have that track record.