

Britain: Police will not face charges over Harry Stanley killing

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Police officers who shot dead an unarmed man while he was walking home will not face charges. The ruling by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) follows a review of their original decision, made 12 months ago, not to prosecute the officers who shot the unarmed Harry Stanley as he was on his way home from a pub in Hackney, London.

In a statement, the CPS ruled out a prosecution because it would be “very difficult” for prosecutors to disprove the assertion made by the police officers, who “honestly believed that they were facing a sawn-off shotgun.” The CPS added, “This threat was of a sufficient degree to merit the use of their guns to defend themselves in reasonable self defence.”

Harry Stanley was killed on September 22 1999. He was only 600 yards away from his home when two armed policemen opened fire from a distance of just 15 feet. Stanley had just been released from hospital after treatment for cancer. He had stopped in the pub on his way home, carrying a wooden coffee table leg in a plastic bag. In the pub, a bystander reportedly mistook his Scottish accent, and rang the police alleging to have overheard an Irishman, who they claimed was carrying a weapon. After leaving the pub, Stanley was challenged by the armed police officers, he attempted to raise his hands, but was shot twice—once in the hand and once in the head—dying instantly. The police claim they thought Stanley was carrying a sawn-off shotgun.

Jason Stanley, Harry’s son said of the CPS decision, “The family has suffered the same stress as many others before us when a loved one has died at the hands of the police. Today’s decision is wrong and, unless there is a change, in the future more innocent people will be shot dead by the police.”

Irene Stanley, Harry’s widow, said, “Their decision effectively gives the police a license to kill.”

On average police in Britain shoot one person every eight weeks, a third of these resulting in death. In 25 percent of police shootings the victim is mentally ill. Recently, Derek Bennett (28) was shot six times after police mistook his novelty gun-shaped cigarette lighter for a real weapon.

Prosecutions of the police in such cases are very rare. Only in two instances have officers faced charges—in the case of David Ewin, who was shot dead in his car in South London in 1995, and that of James Ashley shot in January 1998. On both occasions the officers were acquitted.

Angry campaigns by victims’ families and civil rights groups have forced the Labour government to mount a review of police procedures. But this is little more than a diplomatic exercise. Labour has repeatedly turned down relatives’ requests for an independent inquiry into the shootings. The relatives of Harry Stanley branded the review “a waste of time.”

Lawyers acting for the Stanley family are considering seeking a judicial review of the case, with a view to forcing the CPS to bring criminal charges. They are also considering suing the Metropolitan Police.



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