

New York police kill unarmed man in Brooklyn housing project

Tom Hall**22 November 2014**

New York City police shot and killed an unarmed 28-year-old black man Thursday night in a Brooklyn housing project, in what the city's political establishment is referring to as an "unfortunate accident." The news of this latest murder by the New York Police Department (NYPD) comes as the ruling elite prepares a crackdown in advance of a grand jury decision on whether to bring charges against the Ferguson, Missouri, police officer who killed Michael Brown in August.

Akai Gurley was leaving the Louis H. Pink housing project with his girlfriend at around 11:15 p.m. Thursday night via a darkened stairwell when he was shot once in the chest by rookie officer Peter Liang. Gurley tumbled down a flight of stairs, where he was attended to by residents. He was taken to Brookdale Hospital, where he was pronounced dead. Gurley, who did not live in the building, had spent the evening in Butler's eighth-floor apartment, where she spent several hours braiding his hair.

Neither Liang nor his partner identified himself or gave the couple any commands before shooting Gurley once in the chest. "They didn't identify themselves," Gurley's girlfriend Melissa Butler told the *New York Daily News*. "No nothing. They didn't give no explanation. They just pulled a gun and shot him in the chest." According to a source within the department, Liang later admitted that he shot Gurley accidentally.

The fluorescent lights in the stairwell had burnt out three weeks prior to the shooting and had not yet been replaced by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). Residents expressed frustration to the *New York Times* about the slow pace of even such basic maintenance in their building. "You see how dark our staircases are? This is ridiculous," one resident yelled at the building superintendent while maintenance crews

worked "furiously" to replace the stairwell lights Friday morning. "The staircases from [floor] eight down are dark. If you want to walk in them, you need an escort."

Peter Liang and his partner, fellow rookie Shaun Landau, were working an overtime shift in response to a recent spate of violent crime in the project. When they arrived on the eighth floor via elevator and realized that the lights were out, Liang drew his gun, according to Police Commissioner William Bratton in a press conference Friday afternoon. An anonymous police source told the *Daily News* that Liang "must have been nervous" and later explained to his colleagues that "I shot him accidentally."

The police department is treating the case not as a murder, but as an "accidental discharge," asserting that Liang did not intentionally fire his weapon at Gurley. While questioning Liang's decision to draw his weapon, Bratton declared in his press conference that "everything points to accidental discharge" and that the shooting was the result of a "coincidence of events."

Friday evening, CBS New York cited unnamed police sources that claimed that Liang's gun accidentally went off as he attempted to open the stairwell door, and he was not initially aware that he had hit anyone.

Even assuming that Liang did not mean to shoot Gurley, the conditions for this tragedy were set by the NYPD's longstanding policy of "vertical patrolling," an invasive practice whereby officers patrol the hallways of apartment buildings and public housing projects, routinely harassing residents in the hallways and demanding they provide a reason for being in their own building.

The New York Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit in 2012 against the practice in private apartment buildings, alleging that it violates residents'

constitutional rights and disproportionately impacts racial minorities.

Bratton defended the vertical patrols in his press conference, declaring it an “essential part of policing” and claiming that “People in those developments want us there.” The practice has continued unabated under the administration of Mayor Bill de Blasio, a Democrat hailed as a “progressive” alternative to the widely hated policies of the previous mayor, billionaire businessman Michael Bloomberg.

By mid-June, there were more than 94,000 vertical patrols carried out this year by the NYPD. A month later, after hinting at a move toward more patrols at an awards ceremony hosted by Al Sharpton, de Blasio announced \$21.4 million to shift an additional 200 police officers from desk jobs to vertical patrols.

The NYPD is already notorious for its “stop-and-frisk” program, in which officers stopped and searched hundreds of thousands of people on the street every year, most of them minority youth, without any probable cause. This July, Staten Island resident Eric Garner died of a heart attack in police custody after officers tackled him to the ground and placed him in a chokehold. Last month, three of the top officials at Rikers Island, the city’s primary jail, resigned amid a scandal over widespread brutality and torture meted out by guards against prisoners.

De Blasio also addressed the killing of Gurley in a press conference Friday in which he portrayed the shooting as a “tragic” event for which nobody bore any obvious responsibility. “On a very human level, we lost a life today,” de Blasio told reporters, “But it does appear to have been a very tragic accident.” He said nothing about whether Liang would be charged, only mentioning that he had had his badge and gun taken away and was placed on “modified duty,” and that “there’s going to be a full investigation, to say the least.”

De Blasio attempted to deflect comparisons between Gurley’s murder and the deaths of Michael Brown and Staten Island resident Eric Garner this summer. “I think the public is discerning that each incident is different,” de Blasio said. “What happened in Ferguson is different than what happened on Staten Island, and is different from what happened in Brooklyn.... I don’t think it’s necessarily right to connect the dots and say ‘oh, all of these things are of the exact same piece.’ ”

Were it not for the events in Ferguson, Missouri, New York City would almost certainly be the main focus of widespread opposition to police brutality in the United States.



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