

The murder of Akai Gurley and police repression in New York City public housing

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Last November, police shot and killed Akai Gurley, an unarmed 28-year-old African American man, while he walking down a flight of stairs in Brooklyn's Louis Pink public housing projects. Gurley's death has exposed the deadly and authoritarian police presence faced by some of the poorest sections of the working class who live in housing complexes run by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA).

New York City Police Department (NYPD) officer Peter Liang shot Gurley while conducting with his partner a "vertical patrol"—a regular tactic, in which officers walk up or down the stairways of public housing buildings. Gurley and a friend entered the unlit stairway because the elevator was broken. Liang was apparently patrolling with his gun drawn, and, according to Gurley's friend, neither he nor his partner announced that they were police officers before he fired the deadly shot.

Later, it emerged that Liang texted his union representative before calling for medical assistance for Gurley, and that earlier in the night both officers had been ordered not to conduct vertical patrols.

The following day, the NYPD claimed that the shooting was most likely the result of an accidental discharge of Liang's firearm. The Brooklyn District Attorney's investigation is ongoing.

New York City mayor Bill de Blasio immediately denied any similarities between the death of Gurley and the police killings of Eric Garner, who was choked to death by an NYPD officer in Staten Island on July 17, or Michael Brown, who was shot by a cop in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9. De Blasio stated, "Each incident is different, each of them has their own dynamic."

Police Commissioner Bill Bratton, while admitting that "the deceased is totally innocent," has continued to

defend the crackdown on minor crimes—the heart of the "broken windows" theory of policing that he helped pioneer. The day after the shooting, Bratton stated that vertical patrols are an "essential part of policing," and that "we respond to crimes, significant crimes unfortunately, that do occur in those hallways and on those roofs."

The recent slowdown by the NYPD in opposition to the de Blasio administration has focused precisely on "broken windows" policing, with a sharp drop in the issuance of summonses for nonviolent violations such as parking violations and public alcohol consumption. As of last week, after negotiations with Bratton and the police union, the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association, these sorts of arrests appear to have climbed upward again.

While statistics are not available on the impact of the cop slowdown on NYCHA housing complexes, police patrolling in public housing has been a model of "broken windows," long used to crack down on nonviolent crimes and keep residents in a state of humiliation and terror.

Vertical patrols have declined slightly over the past period, but arrests for trespassing on NYCHA property have increased. NYPD spokesman Stephen Davis told the *Wall Street Journal* that as of June 8 there had been 94,000 vertical patrols in the NYCHA system, compared to 109,000 in the same period the previous year. At the same time, arrests for trespassing increased by 8.8 percent during the same period.

The police also enforce the rules of the NYCHA, and violation of these rules can be cause for eviction from the country's largest affordable housing program. Any one of the more than 400,000 individuals living in NYCHA apartments could lose his or her subsidized housing if he or she is caught barbecuing without a

permit, or “lingering” in front of a building that that or she does not live in, or sitting in a NYCHA park after dusk. None of these are violations that other New York residents are subject to.

Earlier this month, the city reached a preliminary settlement in the *Davis v. New York* class action suit, filed five years ago, that accuses the NYPD of targeting NYCHA residents based on race for searches, known as stop-and-frisks, and trespassing arrests, which includes arrests of residents of public housing and their visitors.

As part of the settlement, a court-appointed monitor will oversee changes in training manuals and guidelines for police interactions with NYCHA residents. Seymour James, attorney-in-chief of the Legal Aid Society, told the New York *Daily News* that the new protocol requires police to file a report that documents and justifies encounters with individuals. The settlement, which still awaits a judge’s approval, does not eliminate the vertical patrol program or address conditions under which officers can have their guns drawn.

This was the social context of Akai Gurley’s death. It is part of an increasingly brutal and militaristic type of policing being used against the American population, and particularly against the poorest, most disenfranchised sections of the working class.

In New York City this takes an acute form as the ruling elite depends on the NYPD to suppress rising anger over the social inequality that pervades the city.

WSWS reporters went to NYCHA’s Frederick Douglass Houses, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, to speak with residents about police violence.

Ian, a student at LaGuardia Community College, said he was raised in the development and still comes back at times to stay there with his grandmother. He said the cops conduct the same kind of vertical patrols there as the one in which Akai Gurley was killed.

“The newer officers press issues more than the older ones, and some just don’t know their job,” Ian said. “I think they may have quotas for arrests because I see more police around the first of the month, also on weekends and at night. There are more in the morning for the school kids.

“I just try to stay out of trouble. But they assume you are doing something before they investigate. They arrest before they ask. There may be people smoking,

sometimes marijuana or other drugs, and the police will put someone in holding before they know what they are smoking.

“I have been harassed by the police, too. If I step outside, I get asked for my ID, even though they know me. I have been arrested several times for trespassing in my own building, with ID. They say there was a complaint but will not let me hear a report or show me a report or tell me who called in the report. So I end up arrested even though I have a right to be here.”

Another resident, Steven, said, “One time the police asked for my ID when I was just chillin’ in the staircase in my own building with two girls. They said we had no right to be there.”

Steven immediately added his dissatisfaction with the living conditions, “The real criminals are the people who don’t fix the elevators. One of the elevators in the building is not working since I lived here. The other elevator was just fixed last month.

“A grand jury will let the cop who killed Akai Gurley get away. It does not matter if it is a black prosecutor and a mostly black jury,” he said. “That is how the government is now. We are being disrespected. The government does not care about us, just about keeping the rich rich. They want to save more money for themselves, not fix housing.”



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