

Brooklyn grand jury indicts cop who shot Akai Gurley

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12 February 2015

Brooklyn district attorney Kenneth Thompson announced on Wednesday that a grand jury had indicted New York Police Department (NYPD) officer Peter Liang on manslaughter charges in the shooting death of Akai Gurley at the Louis Pink public housing development last November 20.

Liang had his 9mm handgun drawn as Gurley and his girlfriend entered a stairwell after an elevator had not arrived in time in one of the buildings owned by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). After opening a door to the stairwell one flight above, Liang immediately fired his weapon, pointing downward, hitting Gurley in the chest. Gurley, 28 years old, staggered down another two flights before collapsing and later dying. Liang's first action after the shooting, according to reports in the media, was to text his union representative.

Liang appeared in Brooklyn State Supreme Court on Wednesday, in a room that was packed with NYPD officers. He pleaded not guilty to the manslaughter charge as well as to lesser charges, including second-degree assault and reckless endangerment, and was released on his own recognizance, without having to post bail. If convicted on the manslaughter count, he could face 15 years in prison.

Gurley's family has taken out a civil suit against the city for the killing. After Liang was charged, a group of Gurley's friends and family chanted, "The whole damn system is guilty as hell."

Liang and his partner had been on a "vertical patrol" in the housing development, checking each floor in the high-rise building, even though they were reportedly under official instructions not to carry out such a patrol that evening.

The killing of Gurley is a part of a larger pattern of police violence in New York City and around the

country, including the chokehold death of Eric Garner on Staten Island in July and the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in August.

Vertical policing is one of a variety of NYPD measures initiated in recent years in the poorest neighborhoods of the city. Repressive policies and rigid enforcement of regulations, including prohibitions against loitering or sitting in local parks after dusk, have, in the name of "safety," made residents virtual prisoners in their own homes and immediate neighborhoods.

Following Gurley's death, Police Commissioner William Bratton called it a tragic accident and termed Gurley a "total innocent." This is little solace for the family and loved ones left behind by this young man.

The circumstances in the death of Gurley were somewhat different from those in the cases of Garner and Brown, whose deaths were anything but "accidents." Nevertheless, the killing of Gurley without any doubt reflects the pattern of wanton police disregard of the lives of workers and youth, particularly in poor and minority neighborhoods.

The NYPD is widely despised in NYCHA developments, where nearly half a million New Yorkers live. Thousands have protested in New York City in recent months against the police violence of which the killing of Gurley was only one of the most recent examples. The more than 50,000 protesters who assembled in Manhattan's Washington Square Park on December 13, in response to the refusal earlier that month of a Staten Island grand jury to indict Officer Daniel Pantaleo for the chokehold death of Eric Garner, were also thinking of the death of Akai Gurley only a few weeks earlier.

An indictment of a police officer in these circumstances is extremely rare, as reflected in the

refusal of the authorities to bring indictments against the cops involved in the murders of Eric Garner and Michael Brown. Furthermore, it is far from certain that Liang will be convicted on any of the charges. When NYPD officer Richard Haste was indicted for manslaughter in the killing of unarmed Ramarley Graham in 2012, the case was dismissed on a technicality and a second grand jury refused to indict. If Liang waives his right to a jury trial and allows a judge to render the verdict—as police usually prefer rather than facing a jury—there is every likelihood that he will be acquitted, as were three of the five cops who shot the unarmed Sean Bell in 2006 in a fuselage of 50 bullets.

The indictment of Liang is at least in part a gesture in response to the wide outrage over the recent police killings. Last month, in response to a suit, the city agreed to make minor reforms in its treatment of residents of the city housing projects, which include a rewriting of police manuals and a fuller documentation process for encounters with NYCHA residents.



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