Los Angeles police officer fires assault rifle in crowded store, killing 14-year-old girl

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On December 23, Los Angeles police responded to multiple 911 calls reporting an assault inside a crowded clothing store in North Hollywood, a working-class area within the City of Los Angeles. During the incident, one police officer fired three rounds from a military-style assault rifle, killing the assailant and also unintentionally killing a young girl, who was in a dressing room with her mother.

The victim, 14-year-old Valentina Orellana-Peralta, was trying on clothes for her *quinceañera*, the traditional celebration of a female's fifteenth birthday throughout Latin American culture.

On Monday, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) released a 35-minute-long Critical Incident Community Briefing video—a slickly edited compilation of 911 calls, radio transmissions, surveillance camera footage, and body cameras—to explain away the tragedy.

Surveillance video shows that the suspect, Daniel Elena-Lopez, entered the Burlington store with a bicycle and wearing a tank top and shorts. Moments later, he was wearing a multicolored jacket and long pants, viciously swinging his bike lock chain at female customers.

Body camera videos show that several police officers arrived on the scene and entered the store, attempting to find the suspect. The officers took the escalator up to the second floor and found a woman on the floor covered in blood with the suspect a short distance away behind her, posing no immediate threat to anyone.

An officer with an assault rifle, who pushed himself to the lead position while others are heard saying, "Slow down," instantly fired three shots at Elena-Lopez, who dropped to the floor.

Immediately after the shots were fired, screaming and crying were heard in the background. Fourteen-year-old Valentina Orellana-Peralta and her mother were hiding in a dressing room. One of the rounds penetrated a flimsy wall, hitting Valentina in the chest. Orellana-Peralta explained later that she was hugging her daughter and praying when she was shot dead by police.

Both Elena-Lopez and Valentina were pronounced dead at the scene, while at least one unnamed woman attacked by Elena-Lopez was taken to a trauma center for medical attention.

The LAPD absurdly claimed that a bullet ricocheted off the floor and through the wall into the dressing room where Valentina and her mother were hiding. The officer's video clearly shows he fired level, aiming at "center mass," and without regard to people who might be in the background.

The assault rifle, which is identical to those used in the military, fires high-velocity, jacketed rounds that can easily penetrate drywall and are designed to inflict maximum damage when hitting human beings.

An LAPD official told CNN that the unidentified officer is on "paid administrative leave, per department protocols for officer-involved shootings, for at least two weeks."

The California Department of Justice is investigating the shooting under regulations set by Assembly Bill 1506, which took effect on July 1st, requiring the California Attorney General's office to independently investigate police shootings that result in the death of unarmed civilians.

According to a statement issued by California Attorney General Rob Bonta, once the investigation is complete, the findings will be turned over to the special prosecutions section of his office for independent review.

On Tuesday, Valentina's family made a public

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statement. “It is like my whole heart has been ripped out of my body,” said Juan Pablo Orellana Larenas, Valentina’s father. Originally from Chile, she came to the US early this year with “big dreams” of becoming an engineer.

Civil rights lawyer Benjamin Crump, who represented George Floyd’s family last year, spoke of Valentina as a promising youth who “wanted to make the world a better place. Her most important dream was to become an American citizen. They came to America from Chile to get away from violence and to have a better life.”

Rahul Ravipudi, an attorney for the grief-stricken family, called for the LAPD to release all available video and to hold the officer accountable. He argued, “There was no weapon, there was no active shooter, and so there may be multiple problems, whether it be a system failure, whether it be somebody who just shouldn’t have even been on the job.”

On the day of the incident, LAPD Chief Michel Moore told the *Los Angeles Times*, “We have a young girl who was in a dressing room behind a wall that my understanding was in the path of where the officer fired. This is a devastating and tragic circumstance, and it occurred during the actions of one of our officers.”

Moore then pirouetted to a knee-jerk defense of the officer, ignoring the fact that the suspect was not armed with a gun and appeared emotionally disturbed. Moore falsely claimed that there was no way the officer who fired “would have known that there was anyone behind there or that he was looking at anyone other than the suspect and a wall.”

Police officers are trained that bullets, especially high-velocity rifle ammunition, penetrate walls, and that “background” must be taken into account before firing a weapon.

Body camera video confirms that officers knew that there was a dressing room in the immediate vicinity of the suspect prior to the moment they made contact with him. One officer even clearly stated, in reference to the suspect, “He’s hidden to the right. Near the fitting rooms.”

At least two officers had less lethal weapons, while others were carrying service pistols with low-velocity ammunition. None of the officers drew a Taser.

In an immediate sense, this tragedy occurred as a direct consequence of the reckless actions of the unidentified shooter, who reflects the general devaluation of working-class life shared by law enforcement generally. The shooter’s own video shows he fired within two seconds of encountering Elena-Lopez, when he was turning away from the officer and not posing any immediate threat to the officer or anyone else in the store.

More broadly, such tragedies are the inevitable result of a society that brutalizes large layers of the population. Life in the US is characterized by staggering levels of social inequality and an unprecedented global health crisis. As the situation intensifies, the response of the ruling class is to build an increasingly militarized army of unrestrained agents whose ultimate goal is the necessary repression of any form of social upheaval, in favor of authoritarian rule.

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