

San Diego police shoot and kill woman while serving eviction notice

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17 March 2022

Last Friday, the San Diego Police Department (SDPD) publicly released footage of police shooting and killing 47-year-old Yan Li in the doorway of her apartment. The shooting occurred on March 3 after San Diego deputies served Li with an eviction notice from her fifth-floor condominium in Little Italy, a neighborhood in downtown San Diego, California.

The official video shows 10 minutes of heavily edited footage, including the initial gun draw within seconds of Li initially answering her door; then later, it shows more units arriving to remove Li from her apartment; it then cuts to officers opening fire after she lunged toward them with a kitchen knife.

The incident shows a clear indifference by law enforcement with addressing those suffering apparent mental illness or a psychological crisis. It was an overall unnecessary escalation, beginning with the use of armed officers to serve eviction paperwork, and ending with a tragic death just hours later.

Within seconds of the officer handing Li the eviction papers, Deputy Jason Bunch had his gun aimed at Li, who had opened the door with a large knife at her side. The officer said, “Put the knife down right now or I’m gonna (expletive) shoot.” He then repeatedly yelled, “Put the knife down. Put the (expletive) knife down.” Meanwhile, Li was clearly distressed and in a confused state, yelling back at the officer to put his gun down and asking, “How do I know you’re not an intruder?” Becoming increasingly distressed as Bunch continues to yell warnings that he will shoot her if she does not put the knife down, Li demanded to see an official badge, and later yelled for someone to call the police.

Eventually, Li threw the eviction paperwork into the hallway and shut her door—leading to an even greater escalation by law enforcement. At this point, it comes into question what the justified legal response of the SDPD should have been. Li was holding a knife but did not issue threats of bodily harm against the officer, she maintained distance, and ultimately, the purpose of the visit was served—presenting eviction papers is simply ensuring that the tenant receives the paperwork.

The SDPD, however, has worked to justify the ensuing stand-off and entrance into Li’s unit by claiming that some days before, Li had apparently threatened the complex manager and a maintenance worker with a knife. It is not clear if this

supposed threat gave officers cause to enter her apartment, or if it was reported by the managers at all before the March 3 incident; nor has the SDPD commented on whether a warrant was needed to enter Li’s apartment, as they were not granted one at the time. No police report of the alleged prior threat by Li has been shown to the public.

About 40 minutes after Li had closed the door on Deputy Bunch and his gun, an entire team of sheriff’s deputies arrived with additional units from the SDPD, accompanied by police dogs. According to the body camera footage, officers armed with less-lethal weapons like Tasers and bean-bag guns first entered the apartment after using a key, and announced themselves as members of the San Diego Sheriff’s Department. In the video, Li is then heard yelling from behind her ajar bedroom door, still holding the knife. The deputy, whose body camera footage is being shown, has a bean-bag gun trained on Li.

At this point, there were more than seven officers with weapons in hand and a barking police dog crowded into the doorway of Li’s apartment as officers first approached her in her bedroom. From the moment the officers entered the hallway to her bedroom, in less than 10 seconds, officers fired multiple bean-bag rounds, though none of the shots hit Li. Immediately, Li then rushed out of her bedroom wielding the knife above her head. The officer whose body camera footage is being shown ran out of the apartment and fell into the hallway along with a handful of other officers in a domino effect, leaving several officers still in the apartment and other units in the hall.

As the officers spilled over each other into the hallway, Li charged after them, continuing to raise the kitchen knife. One of the officers who had fallen to the ground kicked Li in the stomach, while four officers opened fire from all directions, at which point she collapsed to the floor and was later pronounced dead at the scene.

The time between the moment officers entered Li’s apartment, to her being shot and killed was approximately 30 seconds, according to the video footage. The incredible chaotic and disorganized scene that led to her tragic death should have never occurred.

As shown clearly in the heavily edited video provided by the SDPD, the more than a dozen involved officers, including the

four that fired at Li resulting in her death, made no efforts toward de-escalation. They were completely ill-prepared for a situation involving a person experiencing an emotional crisis, displaying as well an obvious lack of skill or preference for non-lethal means. Li's death was avoidable at every turn.

Questions have been raised as to what legal right officers had to enter and apprehend Li at the presentation of her eviction notice—it is not a crime in California to hold a kitchen knife in your own home, or to ask an officer to prove their identity.

The killing of Li is yet another portrayal of heavily funded police departments that disregard de-escalation strategy, non-lethal tactical training, and crisis training, in favor of greater militarization. This is particularly true for the mentally ill, who have met a tragic fate at the hands of police in large numbers. Those experiencing a mental health crisis are some of the most vulnerable in society, and advocacy groups note that mental illness is a factor in roughly a quarter of all police killings.

American police are responsible for the deaths of more than three people per day according to the *Washington Post*'s Fatal Force database, which reports that in the last year over 1,012 people have been killed by police. Out of the 162 people reported killed so far in 2022 by the *Post*, 19 were showing clear signs of mental illness.

While the population is told there is no money for social services or public education, police forces find an endless spigot for cash and military-grade weaponry. In 2021, San Diego's Democratic Mayor Todd Gloria pushed forth a \$27 million increase for the city's police department, raising their funds to an even \$600 million, after 11 years straight of increases. The city's police budget has increased by more than 50 percent since 2008, while the number of violent crimes in the county has remained steady at around 6,000 per year, according to the city government.

San Diego has a severe high cost of living that is driving evictions and pushing greater numbers into homelessness. This is true for a number of US cities and many of the urban areas throughout the state of California, where the Department of Housing and Community Development reports that almost 470,000 households have applied for rent relief. Meanwhile, only 40 percent have actually received roughly \$2.2 billion worth of funding, meaning that a backlog of hundreds of thousands of households are still awaiting assistance and confront the immediate possibility of eviction.

The National Equity Atlas estimates that 721,000 California residents still owe roughly \$3.3 billion worth of rent payment, and with no substantive federal relief in sight and no solutions from the state government, thousands of families will soon face homelessness.

Since the federal eviction moratorium was lifted at the end of 2021 and the final remnants of federal emergency rental assistance and other pandemic-related financial relief have started to run dry, the millions of Americans that were able to stay in their homes during the first year and a half of the

COVID-19 pandemic have been thrown yet again into uncertainty, facing an ever-present threat of eviction and homelessness.

The CARES Act stimulus payments and temporary measures like unemployment insurance already did little to keep low-income families and workers from severe strain during the pandemic, and now that even those bare minimum relief measures have expired or been exhausted, the US is on the brink of a historic wave of evictions. According to data collected by the Eviction Lab, associated with Princeton University, as soon as the CDC's eviction moratorium guidelines ended in the fall of 2021, eviction filings significantly increased in every city that they evaluated.

Low-income housing advocates across the US are warning that the situation will only worsen as families are already losing their homes at pre-pandemic rates in many major US cities, with no sign of slowing down. Meanwhile, more than 50 rental relief programs across 23 states, including Texas, Michigan, and California, have shut down their programs, either in an attempt to combine with state-run services in order to cope with the influx of applicants, or because they have simply run out of funding.

Between the rising cost of living, including significant price hikes in the cost of groceries and gas prices, and assistance programs and relief nearing total depletion, it can be reasonably expected that millions of American families will soon be on the brink of total financial collapse.

The same forces that have created this looming eviction crisis are the very same that are responsible for the police killing of Yan Li. Under capitalism in the richest state, home to 131 billionaires, there are zero rights to safe and affordable housing or other basic necessities such as food and utilities. Law enforcement officials are heavily armed with military-grade equipment and operate for the protection of property and the ruling elite. Between serving eviction notices and shooting down citizens in crisis, the police operate to serve and protect the interests of private property and profit against the working class and poor.



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