Trial of former officer who killed Patrick Lyoya three years ago begins in Grand Rapids, Michigan

Ashley O'Hara
1 May 2025

The long-awaited jury trial of former Grand Rapids, Michigan, police officer Christopher Schurr, who has been charged with second-degree murder in the death of Patrick Lyoya, an unarmed Congolese refugee, began on Monday in the Kent County Courthouse in Grand Rapids.

The trial's first two days before Michigan Circuit Court Judge Christina Mims included testimony from friends of Lyoya, police officers and witnesses of the shooting. The prosecution argued that Schurr's use of lethal force constituted second-degree murder, while the defense claimed that the former officer was acting in self-defense.

The killing of Lyoya, which was captured on smartphone and police video, sparked widespread outrage and calls for an end to racism, violence and murder by police. The trial and its outcome are being closely watched because the murder charge brought against a police officer is extremely rare and convictions even more so.

According to a study published by Bowling Green State University, for example, in the instances of thousands of people killed by police between 2005 and 2019, there were just 104 non-federal law enforcement officers—police officers, deputy sheriffs and state troopers—who were arrested for murder or manslaughter resulting from an on-duty shooting in the US. Of those 104 officers, as of 2019, 35 were convicted of a crime, 15 by guilty plea, 20 by jury trial, and none convicted by a bench trial.

Patrick Lyoya was born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the oldest of six children. Due to war, the Lyoya family was displaced from their home and spent 11 years in a refugee camp in Malawi. In 2014 the family was granted asylum in the United States. Lyoya's parents worked diligently to rebuild their lives in the United States.

In a 2022 interview with the *Detroit Free Press*, Lyoya's mother described Patrick as a cheerful person, who made others laugh. His father described him as quiet and non-confrontational. A coworker of Lyoya's at an appliance shop remembered him as a focused, diligent worker.

The tragic circumstances of Lyoya's death, who was shot in the head execution-style by Shurr during a traffic stop, left the refugee community reeling. Grand Rapids is home to an estimated 8,000 Congolese refugees and 11 Congolese churches, the largest refugee group in the state. The community's grief over Lyoya's death has been compounded by a growing sense of unease and vulnerability with the Trump administration's assault on immigrants. They are grappling with the erosion of their sense of safety in the United States, a country they had come to seeking refuge from violence and war.

In the aftermath of the shooting, the Grand Rapids Association of Pastors urged Kent County Prosecutor Chris Becker to recuse himself from the decision on whether to charge Officer Schurr and requested a federal investigation. The Lyoya family also demanded the immediate release of the dashcam video. A private autopsy commissioned by the family revealed that Lyoya was killed from a single shot to the back of the head and the report was made public.

Officer Schurr was formally charged with second-degree murder in June of 2022. The Fraternal Order of Police in Grand Rapids denounced the charge as a "ridiculous miscarriage of justice" and established a donation fund in support of Schurr.

The shooting also prompted ongoing protests and vigils in Grand Rapids and Lansing, with hundreds gathering to demand justice for Lyoya. The family's quest for justice has now spanned over three years, with protests and vigils

© World Socialist Web Site

continuing to take place annually on the anniversary of Lyoya's death.

On Monday morning, supporters for both parties convened outside the courthouse. Schurr's supporters displayed American and pro-police "thin blue line" flags, while Lyoya's supporters chanted "Justice for Patrick." Schurr has been free on bond pending the trial's outcome.

The events surrounding the fatal shooting of Lyoya are well-documented through the video footage. On the morning of Monday, April 4, 2022, following a traffic stop initiated due to an improper license plate, Lyoya exited his vehicle and attempted to flee before engaging in a physical altercation with Officer Schurr over control of the officer's taser. Video footage shows Officer Schurr struggling to restrain Lyoya, before eventually drawing his firearm and fatally shooting him at close range in the back of the head.

In his opening statement, Kent County Prosecutor Chris Becker maintained that the use of lethal force in this incident was unjustified. Becker stated that Lyoya never had any intent to harm Officer Schurr, only to get away. He underscored that the taser, classified as an electronic control device, is not designed to inflict lethal harm.

While Lyoya did resist arrest, the evidence does not suggest that he posed a significant threat of serious harm to Officer Schurr. In video footage of the incident Lyoya appears confused and scared after exiting his vehicle. Mikayla Hamilton, an attorney representing Schurr, argued that this case is about self-defense and that Officer Schurr was "fighting for his life."

Lyoya's passenger, Aime Turishme, provided testimony about the events leading up to the shooting. Turishme recounted that Lyoya pulled over to investigate a loud noise coming from the vehicle. Turishme also recalled Lyoya and Officer Schurr going back and forth aggressively, eventually ending with Schurr gaining control on top of Lyoya.

Wayne Butler, a local resident and eyewitness, testified that he observed Lyoya exiting his vehicle and a struggle began with Officer Schurr in his front lawn. Butler noted that Lyoya ran in a circle attempting to evade Officer Schurr, rather than a straight line. Butler observed Lyoya being forced to the ground, where he failed to comply with Officer Schurr's commands, but did not actively resist or threaten the officer.

Butler also noted that during a brief separation between Lyoya and Officer Schurr, neither party took advantage of the opportunity to retreat nor did the officer call for backup. Butler testified that he never saw Lyoya exhibit aggressive behavior towards Officer Schurr. He saw Schurr ineffectively deploy his Taser. Lyoya attempted to defend himself against the Taser, prompting Butler to run upstairs to retrieve his phone to record the situation. Butler heard the "pop" of the gunshot before he made it back outside.

Bryan Chiles, an expert witness from Axiom Forensics, provided testimony regarding the mechanics and safety of Tasers. He clarified that Tasers are handheld devices, distinct from firearms, designed to temporarily incapacitate individuals by injecting electricity that overrides the nervous system, inducing muscle contraction.

Chiles explained that while Tasers emit high voltage, it is the electric current that poses potential risks. He assured the jury that, from an electrical safety perspective, Tasers are designed to not adversely affect the heart or cause permanent bodily damage. The Taser's effects are temporary, causing no long-term physiological impact. However, Chiles cautioned that when deployed in drive-stun mode, the Taser can cause significant pain and possibly serious injury.

Seth W. Stoughton, a former Tallahassee police officer, defined "officer created jeopardy," for the jury, a concept referring to unjustified risk-taking by law enforcement which increases the chance that an officer will use force in a situation they are responsible for creating.

In his expert opinion, Stoughton concluded that the use of deadly force in this incident was not justified, as there was no imminent threat of great bodily harm or death. He further noted that established police protocol dictates that officers are required to provide a verbal warning before resorting to deadly force.

Nicholas G. Bloomfield, a former police officer and expert in use of force and accepted police practices, testified as the prosecution's final witness. Bloomfield expressed concerns regarding Officer Schurr's decision to deploy the Taser in such close proximity to Lyoya, particularly since there were no environmental restrictions for creating space between them.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site