

18 Penn State Students Charged in Fraternity Death

By [SHERYL GAY STOLBERG](#) MAY 5, 2017



Timothy Piazza with his parents Evelyn and James Piazza at a high school football game in Flemington, N.J., in 2014. Patrick Carns, via Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Eighteen students at [Penn State](#) University were charged Friday in the death of a 19-year-old sophomore who became drunk and fell repeatedly during a fraternity “pledge night” in February. Authorities said the student was left overnight, unconscious and obviously injured, by fraternity members who knew he needed help but failed to seek it.

Eight of the students were charged with involuntary manslaughter — as was the fraternity itself, the Penn State chapter of Beta Theta Pi. The other

10 face lesser charges, including hazing and furnishing alcohol to minors. Prosecutors also contend the fraternity brothers tampered with evidence to try to thwart an investigation.

The Feb. 4 death of Timothy Piazza, an engineering student from Lebanon, N.J., rocked the Penn State campus. The university's president, Eric Barron, barred the fraternity from the university and imposed strict new regulations on Greek life, including a prohibition on liquor, kegs and all-day parties.

The charges, which grew out of a monthslong grand jury investigation, came just as Penn State was beginning its spring commencement weekend. They were announced on Friday by the Centre County district attorney, Stacy Parks Miller, at a news conference where she was joined by Mr. Piazza's parents.

"The details in these findings are heart-wrenching and incomprehensible," Mr. Barron said in a statement Friday, adding that "no pain we feel can begin to compare to the devastating heartbreak that Timothy's family and friends are experiencing."



A television crew outside the Beta Theta Pi fraternity house on the Penn State campus on Friday. Haley Nelson/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, via Associated Press

The Penn State case comes as prosecutors around the country are becoming increasingly aggressive in filing criminal charges against fraternity members for hazing. In 2015, in what was then called the largest hazing prosecution in the nation, 22 former fraternity members at Northern Illinois University were convicted in connection with the death of a freshman, David Bogenberger.

But the Bogenberger case involved misdemeanor charges only. Those charged with involuntary manslaughter — a felony — in the death of Mr. Piazza also face felony charges of aggravated assault, which could result in prison terms.

The 70-page grand jury indictment was based in part on videotape from surveillance cameras inside the fraternity house that captured Mr. Piazza's final hours, as well as text messages between the fraternity members. It revealed, in gruesome detail, a night of drunken partying that led to Mr.

Piazza's death.

The party, on Feb. 2, consisted of a pledge initiation ritual in which the fraternity pledges lined up for a “gauntlet” of drinking stations, the indictment said. First, they passed a vodka bottle down the line, requiring each pledge to drink from it, before moving onto the next station, where they were required to “shotgun” a beer, and then another, where they were made to drink from a “wine bag,” before descending to the basement to play beer pong.

At about 10:40 p.m., Mr. Piazza was spotted, obviously drunk, “staggering, while hunched over.” He was helped to a couch by one of the fraternity brothers. Some of the other brothers tried to get him up, and he was later seen stumbling toward the basement stairs.



The Centre County district attorney, Stacy Parks Miller, left, hugged Evelyn Piazza at a news conference on Friday. James Piazza stood next to a photo of Timothy. Joe Hermit/PennLive.com, via Associated Press

In a group text message shortly before midnight, one of the fraternity members wrote: “Also, Tim Piazza might actually be a problem. He fell 15 feet down a flight of stairs, hair-first, going to need help.”

The brothers later returned Mr. Piazza to the couch, the indictment said, where they were seen “back-packing him” -- putting a backpack, stuffed with textbooks, on his back to weigh him down, so that he would not roll over and choke on his own vomit.

The video showed him, unconscious and unresponsive, his arms limp even as fraternity brothers tried to splash liquid on his face in an unsuccessful effort to revive him. His chest was bruised and his eyes were shut, the documents said. The brothers hovered over him for much of the night, and he eventually awoke, then passed out again.

The fraternity members did not call for an ambulance until 10:48 a.m. on Feb. 3, the documents said – nearly 12 hours after Mr. Piazza’s ordeal began.

The grand jury also wrote unsparingly of the fraternity culture at Penn State, a campus that last made national headlines amid a sexual abuse scandal involving its former assistant football coach. The indictment pinned “direct fault” on the entire Penn State Greek community, writing that it “nurtured an environment so permissive of excessive drinking and hazing that it emboldened its members to repeatedly act with reckless disregard to human life.”

The events had already prompted Beta Theta Pi’s international fraternity to suspend and disband the Penn State chapter. In a statement on Friday, it called the charges “incredibly disheartening.”