In response to shooting deaths at Arkansas school

Government, media suggest prison or death for child offenders

Bary Grey
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Within hours of the shocking and tragic events at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas, government officials announced they were investigating the possibility of applying federal criminal statutes to the two children who fired at their schoolmates and teachers, killing five and wounding fifteen.

The aim of the officials was to circumvent Arkansas laws that rule out the prosecution of children under 14 as adults, and mandate that convicted juveniles be released at the age of 18. At the very least, it was explained, the 13-year-old and 11-year-old involved in the Jonesboro shootings could be kept under lock and key for an additional three years if they were convicted under federal auspices.

At the bidding of Clinton, who issued a directive from his tour of African capitals, Attorney General Janet Reno announced on Thursday that the Justice Department was poring over federal statutes to find a means of prosecuting the youth in the Jonesboro case.

The television networks, for their part, ran stories on their evening news broadcasts encouraging the idea that tougher prison terms, and even capital punishment for child "killers," should be instituted in response to several cases over the past six months in which youngsters have shot and killed fellow students at their schools.

On Thursday evening, NBC News headed its report on Jonesboro shootings with the news tag: "Juvenile justice—how to punish the youngest killers." It noted the current case in Michigan in which an 11 year old is being tried for murder as an adult, and another case in which an 18 year old has been sentenced to be executed. It featured a report on a middle school in a poor, working class section of Los Angeles which uses, among other things, daily random searches of students to control gang-related violence.

CBS News spoke of a "public outcry" against Arkansas laws that prohibit the prosecution of the children in the Jonesboro case as adults, and featured a sympathetic report of a campaign in Mississippi for a new state law that would impose the death penalty on anyone, including a minor, convicted of killing a person at a school.

CBS News interviewed the father of a teenage girl who was killed last October when a distraught 16 year old went on a shooting spree at a high school in Pearl, Mississippi. The bill, which has been dubbed "Christy's Law," is making its way through the state legislature.

It is not surprising that the American political establishment and media should react to Jonesboro as it does to every expression of social crisis and distress, i.e., by treating it first and foremost as a police matter. They, of course, do not attempt to explain why such terrible events continue to occur with, if anything, greater frequency, even as prisons proliferate, the population behind bars continues to soar, and state executions become an almost weekly occurrence.

Nor do they address the fact that similar instances of deadly violence—at schools, work locations, restaurants—are proliferating not only in the US, but in other so-called advanced capitalist countries as well. Just within the past two years massacres by deranged gunmen have occurred in Dunblane, UK, where 16 schoolchildren and their teacher were gunned down; Port Arthur, in the Australian state of Tasmania, where 35 were shot dead at a crowded cafe; and the township

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of Raurimu in New Zealand, where six were killed and five wounded.

The World Socialist Web Site will post a comment tomorrow discussing the social and political roots of these tragic and disturbing events.

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