

The case of Nathaniel Abraham: background to the prosecution of a child for murder

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Oakland County, Michigan prosecutors are set to try the case of Nathaniel Abraham, a 12-year-old youth from Pontiac, Michigan, when a temporary stay expires. The trial was initially set to begin May 11. It was delayed for 90 days to allow prosecutors time to appeal a ruling throwing out the confession Abraham gave to police. The case could go to trial as early as mid-August.

Abraham is one of the youngest persons in the United States ever to be tried as an adult on first degree murder charges. He was just 11 at the time of his alleged crime. He has been charged in the October 29, 1997 shooting death of Pontiac teenager Ronnie Green. The youth was hit with a bullet from a .22-caliber rifle while leaving a convenience store. First degree murder in Michigan carries a maximum penalty of life in prison without parole.

The case is being tried under provisions of a state law that went into effect in January 1997. The legislation does not set any minimum age at which children can be charged as adults.

The prosecution of Nathaniel Abraham is one of a series of cases across the United States where juveniles are being tried as adults. These include teenagers in several states charged in connection with the recent wave of school shootings. The prosecution of these youth is part of a trend toward the abandonment of a separate system of juvenile justice. By obliterating the distinction between youth and adult crimes the US is eroding reforms that date back 100 years.

Not one of the reports in the media on the Abraham case has considered in a serious way the social roots of the case. Even a brief examination of life in Pontiac, a fairly typical midwest industrial city of about 70,000 inhabitants, reveals the impact of poverty, economic inequality, overtaxed public schools and a collapsing social safety net.

These conditions exist in a city that is surrounded by some of the greatest concentrations of wealth in the United States. Just a few miles south of Pontiac is the Oakland County community of Bloomfield Hills, one of the wealthiest cities in Michigan. The city counts among its residents many top executives of the Big Three auto manufacturers. Its 1995 median household income was \$152,320.

Growing up poor in the midst of plenty, is it any wonder that wide layers of working class youth feel isolated and frustrated? In a society which glorifies the dollar above everything else, those who come from families with little means are branded as failures, people who count for nothing.

What were the conditions that influenced Nathaniel's development?

Born in 1986, Nathaniel endured a hard life. Shortly after he was born his father took off, leaving his mother Gloria and an older brother and sister without support. Having nowhere else to go, the Abrahams were forced to move into the home of an older couple who offered to help them.

Gloria Abraham struggled to raise her family on a limited income. The stress of being the sole provider for her children was compounded by signs that her son Nathaniel suffered from psychological problems.

Beginning in 1994, at the age of eight, Nathaniel exhibited a pattern of

difficult behavior, prompting his elementary school teachers to suggest he be tested for behavioral problems or learning disabilities. The tests revealed he was emotionally impaired, functioning three to four years below his age level. The report also indicated he suffered from attention deficit disorder.

It was not until 1996, however, that Nathaniel began counseling sessions. Gloria Abraham reported that he would do well in the sessions, but they seemed inadequate, as Nathaniel would revert back to his old ways at school and at home. He also began to have more and more frequent encounters with the police.

In August 1997 Nathaniel shot a BB gun at his sister and aunt, hitting his aunt in the hand with a pellet. At her wits' end, Gloria Abraham requested help from the police. She asked that Nathaniel be committed to Children's Village, a juvenile detention center, to help settle him down. However, nothing was done.

Later she told a newspaper interviewer, 'I was so tired. I kept asking the police for help. Once I decided to leave Nathaniel at the (police) station, just so he would learn a lesson. They called me and told me to come get him or they'd turn me in to protective services for child abuse.'

Economic distress evident

The area where Nathaniel grew up shows signs of economic distress. It is a racially integrated neighborhood with white, black and Hispanic families. Many of the younger families in the area are on public assistance or work at low-paying jobs. Many of the homes are well tended. However, abandoned homes and vacant lots dot the neighborhood. Next to the Abraham's two-story frame residence is a boarded-up house.

A WSWs reporting team visited a party store down the street from the Abraham home. A clerk recounted how Nathaniel would come into the store to cash in soda bottles. He was struck by the fact that Nathaniel, age 11, seemed to have great difficulty counting his change.

In a response that we would encounter frequently, the clerk seemed stunned by the charges against Nathaniel. 'He was a very nice boy,' he said.

One incident highlighted the social tensions in the neighborhood. As we left the store a youth drove by in a car and, judging by our notepads and cameras that we were reporters, raised his middle finger.

Later we happened to encounter the same youth, James, a neighbor of the Abrahams, as it turned out. In the course of speaking to him about the conditions in the neighborhood, the incident at the party store came up. James interjected, 'That was me.' He apologized explaining that he thought we were establishment news reporters. 'It is not right the way they have been portraying Nathan,' he said. 'They have been making him out as a criminal.'

The World Socialist Web Site spoke to James about the conditions facing youth in Pontiac.

Noting the prevalence of prostitution and drugs, James said, 'This is a

crazy part of the city.'

WSWS: 'What is it like to grow up here?'

James: 'Because of the poverty there are people who do crack around here and, at the same time, there are a lot of people who work. There are jobs, but for many people baby-sitting costs are as much as they make at their jobs. With the cost of transportation--and the public transportation is not very good--they end up making zero.'

WSWS: 'What kind of recreation do children have in this area?'

James: 'There is none that I have seen. You never see any recreation programs for kids. Basically, they don't have much else to do except get in trouble.'

WSWS: 'There is no social support system?'

James: 'From what I have seen there is nothing available around here for kids.'

WSWS: 'Do a lot of youth in this area have the same problems?'

James: 'A lot of kids are upset about the gangster image that is portrayed about them. The image that all they want to do is rip people off.'

WSWS: 'Do the police harass young people?'

James: 'The police are a joke. They give everybody a hard time. They pull people over for no reason.'

While working people in the area were shocked by the shooting, most expressed sympathy with the plight of the Abraham family, recognizing that the shooting tragedy pointed to serious problems in society. The response of Rena Brown and Juan Garcia Jr. was fairly typical.

'I think Nathaniel needs help, but I don't think he needs to be sent to prison,' Rena said. 'When I first heard the story I thought, 'lock him up and throw away the key.' When I started going into the story I began thinking that he didn't understand what was going on.'

'I didn't like the way they treated him when they arrested him. I thought, this little boy needs some help.'

Juan Garcia Jr., age 25, told the WSWS, 'When I first hear that this kid shot someone my feeling was he knew what he was doing and that they should lock him up and give him what he deserves. I didn't know that he functions on the level of a six-year-old. I don't think he should be convicted. I used to see him playing with the other kids in the neighborhood.'

'In fact my son is in the same school, around the corner, that Nathaniel Abraham attended, and he has speech impairment. Because of his condition other kids pick on him and push him around. When they treat him that way he pushes back and for that reason he gets into a lot of trouble. We are hoping to see a counselor this week and in this way something hopefully will be done to help him with his speech and also to keep him from getting into fights.'

Job cuts and plant closings

Pontiac is the seat of Oakland County, which embraces the northwest suburbs of Detroit. While the per capita income of Oakland County as a whole is substantially above the national average, a large portion of Pontiac residents have below-average incomes, with a significant number living below the official poverty line.

In the 1950s and 1960s Pontiac enjoyed relative prosperity due to its manufacturing base anchored by General Motors, which operated several giant manufacturing plants in the city. These factories provided stable and relatively good-paying employment for tens of thousands.

Beginning in the 1970s and accelerating in the 1980s the economic base of Pontiac was devastated by plant closings and mass layoffs. General Motors, in response to changes in technology and tightening competition axed thousands of jobs. A partial list of GM job cuts in Pontiac over the past 15 years includes:

- Pontiac Central Bus Line 600 jobs
- Pontiac Fiero assembly plant 2000 jobs

- Pontiac Central Foundry 1600 jobs
- Pontiac Motors (assembly and parts) 4000 jobs
- Pontiac Truck and Bus (West) 4400 jobs

The neighborhood in which Nathaniel Abraham grew up is in the shadow of the closed Pontiac Fiero assembly plant. As a result of these closures, it has been nearly a decade since the city has built the automobile which bears its name.

Today the economy of Michigan is supposedly booming. But unemployment in Pontiac stands near 10 percent, more than double the national rate. 1995 median household income was just \$24,440, well below the national average of \$35,082. According to 1990 Census data, the part of the city where Nathaniel Abraham lived has a median household income of just \$17,900, barely above the official poverty line. 2,700 households have annual incomes below \$10,000.

The closure of factories has eroded the city's tax base leading to the decimation of public services. In 1993 the Pontiac Board of Education voted to close five schools and privatized some of its operations. It shut the Whitman Human Resource Center and closed four schools for students with physical or mental disabilities. The board sold its fleet of school buses and fired most of its drivers, replacing them with a private transportation company.

Not surprisingly, Pontiac youth drop out of school at a rate far in excess of the national average. More than 37 percent of people over 25 lack a high school diploma. Less than six percent have a four-year college degree.

Beth Gomez, a former resident of the neighborhood told how the plant closings had impacted life in the neighborhood.

'My dad has worked at General Motors for 33 years. He used to work at Pontiac Truck and Bus, now he works at Lake Orion. There have been a lot of changes in the city during that time.'

'Me and my husband moved here because we were young and couldn't afford better. A lot of people are working two jobs and doing what they have to do to get by. A lot of families now live on ADC.'

'I have been out of this neighborhood for 21/2-3 years. It was a good neighborhood. Neighbors would watch out for one another. In fact, this is not the worst area in Pontiac. But I left because I wanted better conditions.'

'In the Pontiac schools children go in and have to walk through metal detectors. I didn't want my daughter to have to go through that. I felt uneasy walking in there myself. I couldn't imagine a child going through that.'

'Seeing that he (Nathaniel Abraham) has psychological problems, I think they should give him help, not lock him up. It is obvious that his mother was trying to get help. Young people see what everyone else is doing, the swearing, the talk about guns.'

The dismantling of mental health

Recently Pontiac suffered a new blow with the closing of the Clinton Valley Center, a state mental health hospital employing 660. The shutdown underscores a significant aspect of the Abraham case. The indifference of the authorities to the pleas of Ms. Abraham for assistance is in part explained by cuts in funding for mental health.

Michigan began cutting its health care programs in 1989 and 1990 under the Democratic administration of Governor James Blanchard. By the beginning of the 1990s, Republican Governor John Engler escalated the cuts, virtually dismantling mental health care for the poor. From 18 psychiatric hospitals run by the state government in the early 1960s, housing 19,000 patients--adults and children--today the state has five institutions, four for adults and one for children, assisting 1,500 patients statewide. Michigan presently has only one mental health institution for children. Six mental health facilities for children have been closed since 1991.

It's a tragedy,' said Jane Zehnder-Merrell of the Michigan League for Human Services, 'We see it too often. There is no place for kids who are disruptive (in the Special Education programs). The next step is to wait until they do something, like this child did, and place them in the criminal justice system. And then we say if it is serious enough, we treat them like an adult.'

Sam Davis, of the Michigan Association for Children with Emotional Disorders, said, 'We have a major problem in terms of mental health service for children in Michigan. I think a lot of youngsters need help, but the mental health system is unable to respond. Our organization feels that with the closing of these hospitals, then the system gets backed up. The outpatient services are dealing with kids who need more intensive services, so it has created a real burden on the community mental health programs. I think if you talk to the juvenile justice people they will tell you they are getting lot more kids who are not mentally right.'

The World Socialist Web Site spoke to Pauline Tucker, a neighbor of the Abrahams, who worked at Clinton Valley hospital for many years before retiring.

'I worked at the Clinton Valley Center for 15 years. I have been on disability since 1984, and even then they were threatening to close it. When I was there you would see people who were not stable taken into family care or group homes when they should have been in the hospital longer. All of the cuts they are carrying out are terrible. They had activities, they had people there to see that patients took their medication. Like a manic depressive--if they take their medication they are OK, but someone has to make sure they take it.

'The only reason they closed Clinton Valley is because they wanted the land for condos. There doesn't seem to be a solution now for the problems people face. If you have kids and have to hire a baby-sitter so you can work, you can't afford a baby-sitter. My daughter is a social worker. Now they want social workers to be armed. I think that is ridiculous.

'I have been living here for 27 years. While I don't know Nathaniel Abraham personally, as I understand he needs help and I think he should get it.'

See Also:

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