Prosecutors, media distorted case against Chicago boys charged with murder

Helen Halyard
15 August 1998

Two southside Chicago boys charged with murder, aged 7 and 8, were released to the custody of their parents Thursday after a six-hour hearing before a local judge. Cook County Juvenile Court Judge Gerald Winiecki overrode the objections of the prosecutor's office, deferring to the findings of a court-appointed psychologist and psychiatrist who said they did not think the two boys posed a danger to others. The boys were confined to their homes with electronic monitors, pending a trial now set for August 28.

As more information has been released about the circumstances of the death of 11-year-old Ryan Harris, it has become clear that the initial reports by the prosecution and the media were grossly distorted. While prosecutor Michael Oppenheimer declared that the case was one of 'a brutal murder,' the statements which the boys allegedly gave to their police interrogators appear to describe a tragic accident, not a crime.

Ryan Harris was riding her bike with one of the boys when the other boy began throwing rocks at them. One rock hit the girl and she fell from her bike and struck her head heavily on the ground. One of the boys allegedly told police that the two dragged the girl's body into the weeds. The other boy claimed to have left the scene as soon as Ryan fell off her bike.

At a police briefing and again during a hearing in front of Judge Winiecki, the police stated that they did not believe the death of Ryan Harris was a premeditated killing, or even that she was intentionally struck by the rock. It was in the context of these statements that the police detectives speculated that the boys might have wanted to steal Harris's blue bicycle.

These carefully hedged statements were transformed by Oppenheimer and the media into allegations that the two boys--both less than four feet tall--were murderers, gang-rapists and thieves. The prosecutor, adamant that the boys be tried for murder, pointed to them in court and exclaimed, 'they stashed her bike, and then, just making sure the whole thing was complete, made sure she was asphyxiated.'

It is significant that residents of the southside neighborhood where the boys lived, and even the mother of the victim, Sabrina Harris, have not shared this reaction. Upon hearing reports that the two boys had confessed to killing her daughter, Mrs. Harris expressed grave doubts about their guilt and asked if she could see them. Speaking to the *Chicago Tribune*, she said, 'She had two sisters, one 7 and one 8, and she could run circles around them. She was a tomboy, she was strong.'

Other residents from the neighborhood where the children lived expressed skepticism about police reports. On Friday *USA Today* carried a prominent report headlined, 'Shock turns to doubt in Chicago,' which cited the growing belief in the Englewood neighorhood, where the killing took place, that the two boys were 'being railroaded.'

The statements allegedly given by the boys to the police have been widely challenged as coerced, since the boys were interrogated individually by teams of five policemen, without the presence of their parents or guardians, let alone an attorney. Under such circumstances young children can be convinced to say almost anything.

Media sensationalism

The Ryan Harris case is a clear example of the way that media works with state prosecutors to sensationalize violent crime. Every element of the case was distorted, beginning with the characterization of Harris's death as a murder, which then required identifying the two boys as murderers.

Typical was the article in the August 11 *Detroit Free Press*, headlined, 'Boys, 7 and 8, to be tried in killing;

© World Socialist Web Site

Kids wanted bike from girl, 11; police say she was molested.' Reuters international news service had the following headline: 'Chicago boys, 7 and 8, describe murder.'

Reports on the television networks were equally sensationalized, aided by the coincidence of the juvenile court hearing for the two youth, aged 12 and 14, arrested for the Jonesboro, Arkansas school shootings. Footage of Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden was shown, followed by reporting on the Ryan Harris case, thus creating the impression that the two Chicago boys were guilty of a similar homicidal attack.

The most direct connection between the two events was made by the *Detroit Free Press*, whose August 12 front-page headline read, 'What should we do with young killers?', followed by articles on the Jonesboro and Chicago cases.

In keeping with the media's fixation on the sickest and most depraved aspects of American life, the murder was depicted as a sex-crime, although there is no indication that the two boys either intended or were capable of such an act.

A local psychiatrist, Carl Bell, head of the Community Mental Health Council in southside Chicago, said a more likely explanation for their alleged actions was childish curiosity. 'That's very common behavior among children,' he told *USA Today*. 'But adults are projecting adult, sadistic, sexual predation and intent on these two little boys.'

A political agenda

What purpose was served by the rush to judgment in the Ryan Harris case? The tragic events were distorted to fit a ready-made template--the transformation of American children, especially in poor and minority neighborhoods, into savage predators capable of adult crimes--in order to back a definite political agenda.

According to one expert, there were 17 children under the age of 10 arrested for murder in the United States in 1996. Younger and younger defendants have been put on trial as adults, each case setting a new national benchmark for prosecutors who have sought to lower the age even further. In response to the Ryan Harris case, one Chicago newspaper columnist suggested that children as young as five years old knew the difference between right and wrong, and therefore should bear the full consequences of their actions.

For some time now a campaign has been underway to eliminate the distinction in criminal justice procedure between adults and children. This is an attempt to turn back the clock to the period before the development of juvenile courts and specialized facilities for youth, in the 1890s, when youthful offenders were thrown into adult facilities and no attempt was made to provide programs aimed at rehabilitation.

Significant in this regard is the account of the Chicago case in the *Detroit Free Press*, which was accompanied by a separate article headlined, 'In Michigan, Age is Not a Factor.' The newspaper noted that a 1997 change in Michigan law allows a child of any age charged with a serious crime to be 'designated' for adult trial in juvenile court. Two 12-year-olds who are awaiting murder trials in Michigan, Nathaniel Abraham and McKinley Moore, can be sent to an adult prison if convicted.

When such horrible events take place, the media never examines the underlying social causes, instead blaming the young children involved, inciting popular hatred of them and advocating the severest prosecution and sentencing. The aim is to create an emotional atmosphere in which it will be impossible to probe more deeply into the issues which are raised. What kind of society creates conditions where children kill children? What kind of society criminalizes its own children?

A concerted effort has been made by the ruling class to inure masses of people, themselves the victims of exploitation, to accept growing levels of social inequality and to blame the individual, rather than society, for the social evils it creates.

See Also:
Two more US children face murder charges
[31 July 1998]
The case of Nathaniel Abraham: background to the prosecution of a child for murder
[2 July 1998]
The shooting in Oregon:
Alienation, adolescence and violence
[23 May 1998]

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site