

Further criminalization of the poor in the US - Working class couple charged for the accidental deaths of their children

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28 October 1998

In what has become a fairly common occurrence in America, a young working class couple in southwestern Pennsylvania was bound over for trial Tuesday for the deaths of their two small children in an accident chiefly caused by social conditions. Their two children climbed into the trunk of the family car and suffocated while their mother, who had just returned home from working the night shift, was sleeping, and their father was working.

Yesterday a Greene County magistrate held over the prosecutor's charges of involuntary manslaughter and endangering the welfare of a child against the parents, Sherry and Carl Wright. District Attorney David Pollock said, 'We feel it's criminal negligence to leave the keys in an accessible place,' and to leave the residence and go to sleep without making sure the children were supervised.

The children--Drew Wright, 2, and his brother, Christopher Wright, 5, died August 2 after climbing into the trunk of the family's Chevrolet Geo to play with kittens and then pulling the lid closed. The coroner report said the boys died from elevated heat and asphyxiation. He found no signs that the boys suffered any form of abuse or that a struggle may have taken place and ruled the deaths an accident.

When asked whether the involuntary manslaughter charges were perhaps too severe, the District Attorney responded, 'We do not expect to exact a punishment more severe than they experienced with the death of their children, but we do feel some responsibility to insure the well-being of the (couple's) third child. I believe these criminal charges will insure his safety and well-being.'

In pursuing the case the local authorities ignored the

circumstances which the young couple face. Despite working long hours, the parents, who live in a trailer home near Waynesburg, barely earned enough to support their family of five. At the time Sherry Wright was working two low-paid jobs, including as a cashier at a local convenience store. She began working the midnight shift as part of the company's training program to be promoted to a manager's job. Returning at home a 8 a.m., she fell asleep exhausted.

Carl Wright had only been able to find a part-time job, working at a hunting and sporting club where he loaded traps for shooters. His only pay was the tips he received. That morning he was called into work and left as soon as Sherry returned.

Such a life is typical for young couples in southwestern Pennsylvania where manufacturing and coal mining jobs--destroyed in the 1980s--have been replaced with low-paying service jobs and part-time and temporary employment. The county has the highest unemployment level in Pennsylvania, more than twice the state average. Average family income is \$22,000, one-third lower than the state's average. Forty-five percent of the children in area schools come from low income families.

Moreover, the state offers no public daycare or day camp facilities for the working poor. And even if private daycare would have been opened on Sunday, the day of the accident, the average cost for the two children--\$60 a day--is far more than what either of the Wrights' could hope to earn in a day.

It has become commonplace for police, prosecutors, judges and politicians to respond to such tragedies--born of terrible social conditions and the gutting of social welfare programs--by treating the

victims as criminals.

The other side of this tragedy largely ignored by the media is that safety advocates and consumer groups have been pressuring the auto industry and government regulators for years to install latches inside trunks in order to allow people trapped inside to escape.

GM, Ford Motor Co., and Chrysler Corporation have complained about the cost of installing the devices--priced at around \$25 a vehicle--as standard equipment. The auto companies have been protected by government overseers who have declared that the equipment is not necessary, and high-powered law firms who have defended them from lawsuits and liability claims. Over this past summer, eleven children including the two Wright brothers died after accidentally getting locked inside car trunks. In West Valley City, Utah five children suffocated after being trapped for at least an hour in a trunk. In Gallup, New Mexico, four children died after climbing into an opened trunk.

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[16 October 1998]



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