

US: What the shootings in Flint and Wilkinsburg have in common

Kate Randall
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The two shooting episodes which took place in the US this past week, though quite different in their details, point at the same time to certain general conclusions that can be drawn from the ongoing eruption of violence in American society.

On Tuesday, February 29, a six-year-old in Mount Morris Township, near Flint, Michigan, shot and killed another six-year-old student, Kayla Rolland, at Buell Elementary School. The two children had reportedly quarreled before the shooting. The very next day, Ronald Taylor, 39, allegedly went on a rampage in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania, shooting a maintenance worker in his apartment and customers at two fast-food restaurants. Two had died and three were left critically wounded before the man surrendered; another man died Thursday from injuries sustained in the shooting.

These shootings were only the latest in a string of such incidents that have taken place in the past 12 months. There have been school shootings—including last April 20 at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, where 12 students and a teacher were killed—and attacks at stock brokerage houses in Atlanta, Georgia last July, a Jewish Community Center in suburban Los Angeles last August and a shipyard shooting in Seattle, Washington last November, to name only a few such events.

While such episodes of violence have become more and more a feature of contemporary American life, the ages of the children involved in the Michigan incident have made this latest tragedy particularly shocking.

The official response to the Michigan school shooting has been predictable, with the authorities looking for someone to pay for the death of the young girl. Jameal James, 19, the man police believe acquired the .32 caliber semi-automatic pistol used in the shooting in a drug swap, turned himself into police Wednesday morning. James was charged Thursday with involuntary manslaughter for keeping the stolen weapon where the child could get hold of it. The child's uncle, Sir Marcus Winfrey, is being held on unrelated weapons and drug charges.

It has been virtually impossible for police and prosecutors in the elementary school shooting case in Michigan to ignore

the impoverished and abysmal conditions under which the young child lived. "Obviously that kind of an environment doesn't give a kid a chance," commented Genesee County Prosecutor Arthur Busch. Indicating that they would not seek criminal charges against the boy, Busch added, "We're not a bunch of wimps here. But we have common sense."

Apparently prosecutors will not invoke the 1997 Michigan law that allows a child of any age to be charged as an adult for serious and violent offenses. In nearby Pontiac the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office tried Nathaniel Abraham as an adult in the shooting of 18-year-old Ronnie Greene, Jr. Abraham, who was 11 years old at the time of his arrest with the mental capacity of a six- to eight-year-old, was convicted of second-degree murder last November 16.

In the days following the shooting outside Flint, a horrifying picture has emerged about the world this boy has inhabited in his short life so far. His mother, Tamarla Owens, 29, had dropped off the six-year-old and his eight-year-old brother at their uncle's house in the week before the shooting, and left her five-year-old daughter at her sister's. Ms. Owens apparently had been evicted from her previous residence, and she needed somewhere for her children to stay while she worked at her job at a nearby mall. According to neighbors, the dilapidated house was frequented by drug traffickers at all hours of the day. The young boys slept together on a couch and made their own way to school, a few blocks away. The boy allegedly found the weapon he used in the shooting under some bedclothes, and had learned how to load and shoot it by observing Jameal James.

The children's father, Derick Owens, was released from prison last month after serving three and a half years for violating probation on convictions of cocaine trafficking and home invasion. He had been working as a janitor at a Flint packaging plant for about a month before being arrested last Sunday for speeding. Police claim that he was trying to elude them, a violation of his probation. For now, the three Owens children have been placed with their aunt, under the auspices of the so-called Michigan Family Independence Agency.

The Beecher School District where Buell Elementary School is located is not dissimilar to countless working class communities across the country. Hard-hit by the slump in the auto industry, the district now has few residents employed at the General Motors factories that used to be one of the area's biggest employers. More than 82 percent of the district's students qualify for free or reduced-priced lunches, higher than the rate in Detroit. Only 24 percent of fourth graders scored satisfactorily in reading, compared to 60 percent statewide. It is an integrated area, with about 60 percent of the residents black and 40 percent white.

But while details of the Owens family's life fill the papers and newscasts, discussion stops short of a serious analysis of the connection between these conditions and the tragedy that took place on Tuesday. The media and the authorities point a finger at a lack of "parental responsibility." Gun control proponents, led by Bill Clinton, contend that if laws mandating trigger locks had been passed the shooting could have been averted. But isn't it ludicrous to advocate "family values" and gun control in this young boy's situation—when he was living without his parents, in wretched poverty, in a house where drugs and weapons were being illegally traded?

Wilksburg, on the east side of Pittsburgh, where Ronald Taylor went on his rampage on Wednesday, has long been impoverished. Even before area steel mills began to shut down and lay off workers the area was economically depressed. A primarily black community, 70 percent of its children live below the poverty line. It has one of the worst public school systems in the state, and teachers there have been without a contract since 1994; the school board refuses to negotiate with them.

Ronald Taylor, who is black, has been arraigned in connection with the shooting on one count of ethnic intimidation—the Pennsylvania version of a "hate crime"—as well as five counts of aggravated assault, a count of arson, carrying a firearm without a license, and one count of causing a catastrophe. Taylor was evidently mentally disturbed, having spent 37 days in the psychiatric unit at St. Francis Medical Center last summer.

Police and FBI agents searching Taylor's apartment found notes, many signed by Taylor, including such statements as "Death to Jerusalem," "white trash" and denunciations of Asians, Italians, the police and the news media. One list labeled "The Satan List" includes the addresses of various businesses in the Wilksburg-Pittsburgh area. Although it is not known whether Taylor had any connection to an organized political group, in such oppressed areas there is no lack of demagogues who seek to channel discontent in a reactionary or racist direction.

John DeWitt, a maintenance man in Taylor's apartment building, reportedly told police that Taylor called him and

another maintenance worker, John Kroll, "white trash and racist pigs." After DeWitt left Taylor's apartment to answer another call, Taylor apparently shot and killed Kroll.

The shootings in Mount Morris Township and Wilksburg have this in common: both took place under extremely depressed economic conditions. Both the Owens family and Ronald Taylor live in an environment plagued by violence and poverty. They are the so-called losers in American society, that segment of the population confined to neighborhoods where little hope survives, neighborhoods dominated in many cases by drugs and violence, including police violence, to many of whose residents jail time is no stranger. Schools are substandard in these areas and most job training programs have been eliminated. With no institutions or organizations to represent them and speak for them, the seething frustrations find no conscious expression and the most vulnerable individuals erupt in anti-social behavior and violence.

Despite the exposure of the deplorable circumstances faced by the young boy in Michigan, and the disturbed and depraved mental condition of the gunman in Wilksburg, the media and the authorities approach both incidents in the main as police issues. Someone must be prosecuted. But one would search in vain for any serious attempt to explain what it is in American society that produces this seemingly endless chain of tragedies.

Dozens of school, workplace and mass shootings have now taken place. If repeated errors or worse occurred in any other sphere of life, a "systems analyst" would be brought in to analyze the problem. It would quickly be determined that something was fundamentally wrong *with the system as a whole*.

Instead, true to form, the response of US authorities and the media to the wave of violence is to lock up still more people, pass more "anti-crime" laws with yet stiffer penalties, install metal detectors in grade schools, harden their "zero-tolerance" stance. To dig deeper into the social conditions lying beneath the surface, which are ultimately responsible for tragedies like those of the past week, would reveal a critically diseased society which has alienated and maimed large numbers of people.



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