

Michigan school shooting: a tragic consequence of US welfare "reform"

Elisa Brehm
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The tragic events of February 29, the day of the deadly shooting of one child by another at an elementary school outside Flint, Michigan, will be remembered forever by Tamarla Owens. She is the mother of the six-year-old boy who killed Kayla Rolland, also six years of age.

Only eight days before the shooting at Buell Elementary School in Mt. Morris Township, Tamarla Owens was evicted from her house for falling behind in rent payments. She took her two boys to her brother's home and her daughter to her sister's. It was in the brother's home that the six-year-old found a loaded gun and brought it to his first grade classroom. The two children had reportedly quarreled before the shooting.

Unlike the Nathaniel Abraham case, where Michigan authorities tried an 11-year-old as an adult, the state is looking elsewhere for blame, since the child is only six years old. Jameal James, 19, has been charged with involuntary manslaughter for keeping the stolen weapon where the child could get hold of it.

The Family Independence Agency (FIA)—the state's social services department—is also threatening to take permanent custody of Tamarla Owens' three children, claiming she is a negligent mother. A trial has been set for May 3 to decide the case. The children are presently in the custody of one of her sisters. She is now allowed supervised visits three times a week, increased from once a week.

But while much has been stated by the media concerning the immediate circumstances surrounding the shooting, there has been no attempt to explain the social chain of events that form the background to the tragedy. Layoffs and plant shutdowns have devastated the Flint area, once a major center of auto production. The resulting precipitous decline in living standards has created conditions in which virtually everyone involved in the February 29 shooting can be described as a victim. In fact, with the exception of that terrible day, Tamarla Owens' daily life parallels those of thousands of young single young mothers in Michigan who have been cut off welfare benefits and moved into state-run work programs.

The conditions that led to this working mother's particularly tragic situation are the fruits of punitive legislation euphemistically called "welfare reform." In 1996 the Clinton administration ended welfare "as we know it" and enacted the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWOA), which has been responsible for forcing people off welfare into low-wage jobs. With this legislation, AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) was abolished. AFDC was created in 1935 as part of the Social Security Act, with the intent of assisting poor women and recognizing that children needed someone at home with them.

Because so many people have been cut from benefits since the passage of PRWOA, Clinton has been praised for the success of the program. The national welfare rolls dropped from 14.2 million in 1994 to 6.9 million in June of 1999. Michigan has been a test case for the destruction of welfare, and it has been in this state that some of the most draconian cuts have taken place. Caseloads in Michigan have dropped from 226,862 in 1994 to 73,824 today, with devastating results.

According to a study from the University of Michigan, "Work, Income

and Material Hardship After Welfare Reform": "Although preliminary evidence does not find increased rates of homelessness or foster care placement among recipients and their children, there is some early evidence that many families who have left welfare remain poor, and that some of the poorest single-mother families may be experiencing reductions in income. Studies in several states indicate that over half of those who leave welfare and work 30 or more hours per week, are not earning enough to lift their families out of poverty."

A look into the life of Tamarla Owens substantiates this. As in programs throughout the country, participants in Michigan Governor John Engler's Work First program are required to work in order to receive welfare benefits. The level of benefits declines, however, the more the person works—with a total benefit cutoff after five years of TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families). Regulations mandate recipients increase their weekly work hours each year or lose whatever benefits are left.

Tamarla Owens is a single mother raising three children ages five, six and eight. She currently works as an assistant manager in training at one of the stores in the newly built Great Lakes Crossings Mall in Auburn Hills. Since she received a promotion, she makes \$7.85 an hour, up from the starting pay of \$7.00 an hour. She has already had five different jobs at the mall, sometimes working two jobs at a time to make ends meet. When she worked as a waitress for a time at the mall, her tips were expected to compensate for her meager wage of \$2.65 an hour.

She went into Work First in November 1998 and found a job in 1999. She explained, "If you do not go into Work First you get no money, no Medicaid, no nothing. If you make more than what the state is giving in benefits, you get cut off. I was cut off. For a while I got \$200 a month in food stamps, and medical care. That was it."

Tamarla Owens' annual income last year was only around \$13,000, placing her below the official poverty level. According to a 1998 report by the Michigan League for Human Services, a single parent raising a family the size of Tamarla Owens must earn an hourly wage of \$16.66, or about \$35,000 a year, to maintain economic self-sufficiency in Genesee County.

The Beecher neighborhood where the shooting took place and where both families live, is one of the poorest areas in Michigan. An estimated 45 percent of households have total incomes of less than \$15,000 a year. Children on free lunch or reduced-price lunch programs account for 87 percent of the student population at Buell Elementary. The only playground for neighborhood children is the one at the school, which is in great need of repair and new equipment.

Like so many single-mothers in this situation, every day is a major struggle. Because her present job requires that she open and close the store, Tamarla Owens arrives at the mall at 9:00 in the morning, one hour before opening time. During the busy holiday seasons she remains until one hour after the closing time, which is 9:00 p.m. The hours are long, but her day is made even longer by the fact that she has no car. She spends five dollars a day on transportation to and from work.

"I wake the kids up early—6:30 a.m.—get them ready for school, and

myself ready for work. I leave the house at 7:30 in the morning. I take the bus from home to downtown Flint, then another bus from Flint to the mall in Auburn Hills where I arrive about an hour and a half later. Depending on how busy we are and how many hours I work, I often don't get home until 11:00 at night.

"By this time my children are sleeping. I go into their rooms, make sure they are OK, give them a kiss, take off my clothes, take a bath and go to bed, because I've got to get up early in the morning and do this all over again. I didn't really get to see my kids a lot, except on my days off. Often my 18-year-old god daughter—who is my child-care provider—would pack them up on the bus and bring them to the mall to visit me while I was at work."

The more months Tamarla Owens worked, the more precarious her situation became. Her rent had been paid out of her benefits, but this stopped in February 1999 after she took the job in January 1999. The family was living in a three-bedroom house for \$300 a month. "It was a nice house," she said. "We had lived there five years. There was a big yard and room for the kids to play."

In October of 1999 her food stamps stopped. She was spending approximately \$350 a month on food.

Meanwhile, her rent was no longer vendored and her utilities—water, electricity, and heat—were no longer subsidized. "By this time, I couldn't get along, so I would pay my rent only every other month. We had no phone, no car and of course no cable television.

"I got a notice from the landlord that we would be evicted. A week prior to the eviction I took a week off from both of my jobs to look for a house. I was unsuccessful. I needed perfect credit. Nobody in America has perfect credit. They wanted \$20 for each application fee. It was the worst week of my life ... until the shooting. I was so depressed. I felt like I was the worst mother in America then. Because I just didn't understand, where am I going to take my children? How can I be a mother and have no place for my children?

"I went back to work on Monday. I called my sister and asked her to care for my daughter since she didn't have to be at school until 11 a.m. I took my boys to my brother's house. They could walk to school from there. I didn't want to take the children out of their schools and, besides, I had no address to give the school. I didn't want to have the kids here, there and everywhere. For me it was different, but I didn't want to do that to my three children. I wanted them to have a steady environment and not to be juggled around. What should I have done? Left them on a doorstep with a note saying—I'll be back to get them when I find a place to stay? In the meantime, please feed them, take them to school."

The family was evicted on February 21, one day before Tamarla Owens' twenty-ninth birthday. She was unaware that state might have covered her rent. "I did not call my case worker to tell her I was being evicted, because I did not know how she would accept that. I didn't know anything about what I could claim from welfare. I had not heard that they have this safety net that would have paid."

It is not uncommon for those in the Work First or similarly run programs not to be properly notified about services and support that may be available to them. For example, Tamarla Owens was not told about daycare subsidies until she learned from a friend that the state agency would pay for daycare.

Ironically, as if from out of the woodwork, representatives from at least half a dozen organizations attended the her pre-trial custody hearing. "Before the shooting," Tamarla Owens commented, "before this incident, I never heard from any of them. I once went without lights for two and half weeks, because I couldn't pay the bill. I used to spend \$50 every few weeks on laundry bills, because I had no washer or dryer. Since the shooting, my sister who has my children has been given a washer and dryer by the state."

"On the day the shooting happened I got a call at work from my sister,

saying that a child had been shot at the school and to come immediately. I missed the bus and had to wait for what seemed to be forever for the next one. I thought for sure that my son had been killed.

"When I got to the school I was told to get in the car before they started photographing me. I said I just want to see my kids, just tell me it wasn't one of my kids who did this. She [the teacher] said she couldn't say that. I just broke down and cried. The news cameras were in my face all the time and they didn't know who I was.

"I do want to meet Kayla's mother and let her know that I knew what she felt because I thought it was my child who was killed. I want to let her know that no child deserves to die, but I was advised by my lawyer to stay away and not go to the funeral.

"Since taking a job my conditions are worse. Don't misunderstand me, I don't mind working, I like working, but they should have weaned us off benefits, not just snatched them from us. They should say we'd help you with the bills for awhile until you can manage, or help teach us how to manage our money.

"You have been on ADC for so long, then as soon as you get a job, there is no time to adjust. You are cut off. I don't have anything now; I don't have a house to stay in. Since my children were taken from me, I no longer have medical benefits for myself.

"The only way to come above this poverty is to hold two jobs. This is welfare reform—they take you away from your kids and then they say you're neglecting your kids."

The plight of Tamarla Owens is not unique, but has become a common feature of American life. It is the direct consequence of a shift in social policy, guided by such catch phrases as "personal responsibility," "family values" and "zero tolerance," and buoyed by propaganda about the booming economy. In reality, conditions for an ever-larger section of the population are not improving, but are becoming increasingly desperate.



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