

# An American tragedy born of poverty: the death of an unemployed mother in Detroit

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In Detroit—a city where nearly half the residents live near or below the official poverty level, where street violence, house fires and drugs claim poor people's lives on a daily basis—the death of a unemployed single mother, tragically, is not an uncommon event. But the recent death of 43-year-old Gloria Teresa Terrell stood out, both because of the horrifying way the woman was killed and because of what it reveals about social conditions in America.

On May 31, Ms. Terrell, a mother of five children, was crushed to death in a trash compactor at a Value Village second hand store. She was apparently hiding from security guards that detained her for allegedly stealing a used pair of shoes—worth no more than a few dollars. Although a customer had offered to buy the items she was accused of stealing, the store manager phoned the police and told Ms. Terrell, “You're going to jail.”

Witnesses said Ms. Terrell became terrified and broke free from the guards, yelling that she wasn't going back to jail. She ran to the rear of the store and reportedly jumped into a trash chute, which leads to a connecting compactor outside the store. The manager said she and other store employees tried to find the woman, but gave up, concluding that she was hiding in the basement stockroom.

According to interviews the police conducted with employees, one worker returning from a lunch break then turned on the machine—which crushes cardboard boxes and other trash into small bundles—without knowing the woman was hiding inside. An unnamed witness said Ms. Terrell began to scream that she was being crushed, but efforts by employees to stop the machine were too late. The same witness said the frightened woman had apparently crawled all the way to the back where the machine's blade was located, and was unable to escape.

It took the help of a towing company for the police to separate the two large metal trash containers from behind the building and pull the victim's body out. Gloria Terrell died of massive internal injuries, according to the Wayne County Medical Examiner. In a particularly disturbing note, a representative from the company that owned the compactor

reportedly told the store manager that he had seen several similar cases, especially involving homeless people living in trash dumpsters and compactors.

The Detroit media generally sensationalizes every violent crime and tragedy that takes place in the city. But the reports of Gloria Terrell's death were decidedly low-key, and were dropped the following day. Not one reporter sought to examine how Gloria Terrell had fallen into such desperate straits or what this tragedy says about social conditions in Detroit. The city's political establishment responded with characteristic indifference. Mayor Dennis Archer—who undoubtedly realized such a story would conflict with his claims that the city is experiencing an unprecedented economic renaissance—said nothing.

On Wednesday, June 7, however, over 100 family members and friends paid their respects to Gloria Terrell at a funeral parlor on Detroit's west side. Several mourners commented on how little value is placed on the lives of poor people.

“Nobody should have to die for a pair of shoes,” Deborah Wright, a Detroit school bus driver and a lifelong friend of Gloria's, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “This was a tragic way to die. Shoes and clothing should be made available for everyone. I knew Gloria for 40 years. She was always a fighter. She was always looking after her kids. It's awful that people have to live under these circumstances.”

Outside the Value Village store Midge Sheppard, another friend, said, “I used to give Teresa a few dollars when I could. Her kids used to walk behind her saying, ‘I want some food,’ ‘I want a toy,’ or ‘I'm not going to school today because I have a hole in my gym shoes.’ Can you imagine what it felt like for her to say she couldn't do anything about it?”

Ms. Sheppard pointed to the fact that the government was shutting down public housing and demolishing it, at the same time developers were building \$140,000 condominiums a short distance away from the city's new \$100 million baseball stadium. “Where are poor people supposed to get that kind of money? It's like they are

pushing the poor out of the city. That's why people are committing suicide, stealing and becoming prostitutes. It's not just black people—it's all poor people.”

Ms. Sheppard condemned Mayor Dennis Archer and Governor John Engler for cuts in social programs, like welfare, that have contributed to the desperate conditions in the city. “They're telling poor people to get off welfare and get a job, but they can't survive without doing something else. I know the governor's triplets are not begging for bologna and peanut butter sandwiches. But that's what Teresa [Gloria] went through.”

Richard C. Jones, a disabled Blue Cross/Blue Shield worker whose wife frequents the Value Village store often, told the WSWs, “People here can't afford to shop at Hudson's or some exclusive store. The class of people who shop here are going to steal sometimes, but that doesn't mean they should be hunted down like animals. We are living in the world's richest country, this woman was raising five kids on her own, on a very low income. It's almost like she was compelled to steal. You can't deprive people of what they need to live.”

Gloria Terrell was born in Detroit on November 13, 1957. Her mother Shirley, originally from Nashville, Tennessee, separated from her husband in 1959 and raised Gloria and five other siblings by herself. Despite the economic hardship of relying on odd jobs and a welfare check, Shirley was able to put her children through school.

After leaving Northern High School in the mid-70s, Gloria went on to get a hair dresser's license from the Virginia Farrwell School of Cosmetology. For several years she worked as a hair designer and then as a waitress in several clubs. In 1978, however, tragedy struck when 21-year-old Gloria lost her first child, five-month-old Tyesea, who accidentally suffocated in bed.

Gloria came of age during a period of devastating economic decline in Detroit. The 1980s saw a wave of auto plant shutdowns and mass layoffs, transforming Detroit from the vibrant Motor City into the poorest big city in America. To make matters worse, massive budget cuts in social programs threw tens of thousands of unemployed workers off welfare and other benefits.

Gloria's mother Shirley told the WSWs that the neighborhood they lived in suffered greatly under these economic conditions, and social problems such as crime and drugs worsened. “It wasn't only our neighborhood,” Shirley said, “it was all over.”

Shirley explained that her daughter became a victim of these problems. “About nine or ten years ago Gloria began to have a serious drug problem. She attempted to get drug rehabilitation and had signed papers recently to enroll. She was sick and tired of that life.”

But Gloria received little if any state assistance for herself and her children. “She received Social Security Insurance disability checks—\$198 every two weeks—for herself and the four kids she lived with. She fell down steps and was forced to walk with a cane or back brace,” her mother commented.

Several months ago, a fire severely damaged Gloria's home and she was forced to move into her mother's house with her four youngest children. Three generations of people crowded into Shirley Terrell's small, but well-kept home on Mt. Vernon, a street lined with burnt-out houses, empty lots and dilapidated homes. Gloria's 10-year-old son attends the local Sheppard Elementary where nearly nine of every ten students qualify for a free lunch because they come from an impoverished household; this compares to one in four statewide.

Shirley is now responsible to raise Gloria's four youngest children: Monique, 3; Chantel, 7; Shirley, 8; and Akeem, 10. The 62-year-old grandmother, who lives on a small disability check, told the WSWs, “I'm here for my grandkids. I don't want them to be placed in foster homes. I want to see them grow up.”

Nineteen-year-old Jacquitta lives with an aunt. As she told the WSWs, “I knew how my mom would buy things for me, so I moved out so that she could get things for the other kids. That's how the oldest has to handle things.”

Jacquitta continued, “Now my grandmother is trying to the raise the kids. The state wants her on a ‘Work First’ program to get a job or go to school for her benefits. How is a 62-year-old going to work now?”

“This house has 10 to 11 people living in it. It's like a shelter—the kids, my aunts and grandmother. Even before this tragedy we were barely surviving. My mother received disability checks, but there was little if anything for the kids. They tried to kick her off the program too.”

Even in death the state authorities showed little regard for Gloria Terrell and her family. Since Ms. Terrell had no life insurance the family was forced to rely on donations and state assistance to pay for the \$2,100 funeral. The welfare department paid only a portion of the costs, and the family still owes another \$780 to the funeral home.



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