Britain: Children targeted by police investigating ten-year-old's death

Tania Kent
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A 15 year old boy from Camberwell, South London was arrested on December 21 in connection with the death of 10 year old Damilola Taylor on November 27. The boy was arrested during a pre-dawn raid at 6am at his home and released later that day. He is the thirteenth child to be arrested and detained by police over Damilola's death.

Nigerian-born Damilola died on a north Peckham estate after bleeding to death from a stab wound to his leg. The media and the government have cynically utilised the tragedy to launch an unprecedented campaign to demonise and intimidate youth and children in the area. With no concrete evidence or witnesses to the death, they immediately claimed that a murder had been committed and that children were responsible. These claims were then utilised to justify a draconian police operation. In one morning last week, 11 children were arrested in pre-dawn raids conducted by 200 police officers in and around the Peckham area where Damilola lived.

The raids were shown on national television as the media had been given notice of the homes to be targeted and were waiting outside. Children were shown being handcuffed and led into police vans. Some were detained for over 48 hours, after Magistrates granted an extension to the period in which police are allowed to question without making formal charges. Police have said that further arrests will take place.

There was no justification for the high profile raids. All the children were aged between 11 and 16 years and highly unlikely to abscond or resist arrest. They were either taken from their homes or, in three cases, from residential care units. Two had already been arrested the previous week and released on bail.

The children were arrested on the most spurious grounds. Police claimed they were either suspects or witnesses who “are known to be associates who mixed together in the Peckham area”. There is currently no forensic or eye witness evidence to link any of those arrested to Damilola's death and no one has yet been charged in connection with it. Police admit that the investigation could take “a very long time yet”. They convened a press conference on Friday December 22, to call for potential witnesses to come forward.

Forensic evidence has established that Damilola was stabbed with a broken bottle, not a knife as was previously claimed. One Sunday newspaper had said that some sources were suggesting that Damilola might not have been stabbed, but could have accidentally fallen on to the shards of glass. His leg wound was fatal because it severed a major artery.

Police reacted angrily to the newspaper's assertion, whilst not discounting it entirely. A police spokesman said that they were still conducting a "murder investigation".

There was no explanation of how it had come to be reported that Damilola was stabbed with a knife. This claim had played a major role in statements in the media and by the government that the 10-year olds death proved that significant layers of children “were out of control” and engaged in a “knife culture”.

Nor has there been any explanation as to why the police are investigating the death as if it were certain to be the outcome of pre-mediated murder. In similar cases where there has been an absence of solid evidence, police usually withhold judgement on cause of death. All such caution has been thrown to the wind in this instance.

It has been repeatedly claimed that crucial facts concerning Damilola's death are being concealed by those responsible or their families. During a service held in memory of the dead child, Labour minister Paul

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Boateng made a hysterical speech in which he demanded of people in the area, "Speak. Tell what you saw, tell the police."

These wild accusations are made despite the fact that hundreds of people in the area, black and white, have turned out at services and demonstrations to show their sympathy with Damilola's family.

But Boateng's denunciation is of a piece with government pronouncements on the "underclass" or "socially excluded". According to this outlook, the poorer neighbourhoods are populated by those who, if not actively criminal themselves, are certainly tolerant of it. Such is the ideological justification for a police strategy aimed at terrorising and intimidating young people in the Peckham area.

Should it transpire that another child was involved in Damilola's death, there could not be a worse example of how to conduct a criminal investigation.

The repressive character of the inquiry, coupled with the media hysteria, is the greatest possible deterrent to anyone coming forward—for fear of the consequences of doing so. Instead of proceeding in a calm and rational way, asking people what they saw and reassuring any child or parent who came forward that they would be treated fairly, the Labour government, police and media are more concerned with promulgating their reactionary social views.

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