

Seven-year-old girl murdered in Brooklyn

Child abuse tragedy shines spotlight on social crisis

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Nixzmary Brown, seven years old, was the fourth child in Brooklyn to die in the care of their parents within the last three months. Her death after beatings at the hands of her stepfather two weeks ago has understandably horrified millions of New Yorkers and others. Little or nothing has been said in the media and by local officials, however, about the deeper causes of this tragedy.

Cesar Rodriguez, 27, killed his stepdaughter in their apartment in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood. He was apparently punishing her for taking a carton of yogurt from the refrigerator. A grand jury has charged both Rodriguez and Nixzmary's mother, Nixaliz Santiago, with second-degree murder. The girl died because of a blow to the head on a bathroom fixture after Rodriguez threw her in the shower. She was allowed to lie on the floor for several hours before a neighbor called emergency services.

On November 6, also in Bedford-Stuyvesant, 16-month-old Dahquay Gillians drowned in a bathtub. On December 28, one-year-old Josiah Bunch was beaten to death in nearby Crown Heights. The families of these children had each come to the attention of the city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS), but the authorities did not prevent the awful ends of their lives.

Last May, officials at Nixzmary's school, P.S. 256, had contacted the ACS because they were concerned by her excessive absences. A caseworker visited the home and, according to news reports, decided that "Ms. Santiago was overwhelmed by her six children. They believed they had persuaded her to return Nixzmary to school and closed the case...."

In December, school officials again contacted the ACS after they noticed that the girl had an abrasion on her forehead and a black eye. Along with two detectives from Brooklyn's Child Abuse Squad, ACS caseworkers interviewed Rodriguez, who claimed that Nixzmary had been hurt in a fall. In the following weeks, an ACS caseworker went to the apartment twice and was barred from entering by Rodriguez. It is unclear if police officers ever interviewed Rodriguez directly.

The aftermath of the death of a child after being abused by a parent in an impoverished neighborhood of New York City follows a familiar pattern. The mayor expresses his outrage and

magnanimously accepts responsibility, in general terms. The rest of the political establishment joins with him to call for increased penalties and stronger police powers. The city agencies scramble to come up with explanations of how another child has "fallen through the cracks." Scapegoats are found.

The tabloid press fans lynch-mob hatred directed at the alleged murderers and calls for the heads of—depending on the specific circumstances of the case—teachers, social workers, and their supervisors.

Finally, after a sensational and well-publicized trial, the child's parents are locked away for years. Siblings and relatives continue in the same environment or worse. Not much changes, and matters continue as before until the next such tragedy seizes the headlines.

The latest case has followed this pattern precisely. Within a few hours of Nixzmary Brown's death, Mayor Bloomberg announced that he was "dissatisfied" and called the incident a "great tragedy." Brooklyn District Attorney Charles Hynes followed with the call for the state legislature to allow first-degree murder charges to be filed in cases associated with child abuse, so that those convicted can be sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. Hynes also endorsed the co-reporting of all potential abuse cases to the police in addition to the child welfare authorities.

The commissioner of the ACS, John Mattingly, supplied the scapegoats, suspending three workers without pay, including the caseworker who investigated Nixzmary's absences from school and a supervisor who handled the case. Mattingly reassigned three other supervisors.

Meanwhile, the gutter press, including Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* and Mortimer Zuckerman's *Daily News*, supplied front-page headlines for days on end for the sole purpose of vilifying Rodriguez and Santiago and witch-hunting the caseworkers.

"Stepdad's history of evil," read one headline in the *Daily News*, referring to Rodriguez's alleged hair-trigger temper, as demonstrated in a 2003 assault on an immigrant worker.

The *Post* was not to be outdone. Rodriguez was described as a "Monster dad" and "punk parent" in an article that reproduced a mug shot of him with a swollen eye from a brawl in Bell County, Texas. In 2001, the article noted, he was

dishonorably discharged from the Army for possessing child pornography.

In another headline, the *Post* brayed, “Parents slept in this comfy nook as their tortured girl lay in agony” and that “no expense was spared on flashy stereo equipment, perfumes, and soft toys for the parents...even while Nixzmary was forced to eat cat food and use a litter box as a bathroom.” In case we miss the point that the mother is hardly fit to live among us, the *Post* points out that Nixzaliz Santiago “has six children with four men.”

The aim of this filth and demagoguery is not only to sell newspapers. It serves an important political purpose—to spread the reactionary claim that tragedies like this have only individual and not social causes. Evil individuals are to blame. The dysfunctional parents are examined without any reference to the conditions that shaped them. Their murderous behavior is the result of “evil.”

Eleven years ago, Elisa Izquierdo’s six-year-old face appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine* over the title, “A Shameful Death.” Elisa, another child of poverty, was severely abused and murdered by her cocaine-addicted mother in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, close to Bedford-Stuyvesant.

Elisa and Nixzmary are both described in similar terms in the media. The victims are “angels” and “princesses.” Their abusers are evil monsters. Both victim and perpetrator are no longer human beings, but spirits or demons, removed from reality and given an almost mythical dimension. The language is aimed at suppressing critical thought. The devil-parent was once a child, of course, hence no less “angelic” than the child who has just died. The obvious question of how the monster was created is not even raised.

One doesn’t have to do that much research to conclude that the vast majority of children who have died after prolonged abuse at home come from impoverished families and neighborhoods. Bedford-Stuyvesant is a neighborhood of approximately 160,000 people in central Brooklyn. Its mean household income is about \$25,000 a year. It is ranked in the bottom 10 percent for six health indicators compared to other New York City neighborhoods. Drug-related deaths, deaths from AIDS, diabetes, and homicide are significantly higher than in the rest of the city.

Of course, poverty is not the only cause, nor does poverty automatically lead to child abuse or neglect. What is obvious and incontestable, however, is that psychologically vulnerable people, themselves often the product of troubled families, are far more likely when placed under additional stress related to poverty to strike out wildly at defenseless children.

In an interview from prison just days after the murder of his stepdaughter, Cesar Rodriguez illustrated this. He demonstrated his inability to understand or cope with troubled or unhappy children. He spoke of his inability to control his rage. He explained that he was the victim of beatings by his mother. In mid-December, his wife had a miscarriage. He was fired from

his job as a security guard and could not afford presents for his children. Bills piled up, and as he stayed in the apartment with the children, he felt that “everything was closing in.”

This is not a portrait of innate evil, but of desperation and severe emotional distress that is at the very least severely aggravated by definite social conditions. Such a man needs intense treatment and care. Being demonized or being put to death, as some right-wing bloggers in New York have suggested, will certainly do nothing to prevent future child-beating tragedies.

There are other Cesar Rodriguezes, and they are being created every day. The murder of Nixzmary Brown and other children in New York is an indication of a growing social disaster. The New York State Central Register of Child Abuse and Neglect has documented a jump in child fatalities, from 46 for 2002, to 63 for 2003, and 73 for 2004.

The city agencies charged with caring for abused children are beset by inadequate funding and poor morale. Their work is conducted in an atmosphere permeated by the Social Darwinist doctrine that all responsibility falls on the individual and that the more vulnerable sectors of society have no one to blame but themselves for their plight. The Bedford-Stuyvesant offices of the ACS are particularly overwhelmed. “At any given time...workers can be responsible for 10 to 20 cases, a third of them involving families plagued by substance abuse and mental illness,” according to a report in the *New York Times*. Over the last four years, the ACS’s budget has been cut by more than \$200 million and it has lost 1,000 workers.

The authorities begin from the conclusion that nothing can be done about the horrific conditions in poor neighborhoods. Hence, the usual combination of sensationalist hysteria on the one hand, and pious hand-wringing and proposals to tinker with the child welfare system on the other. Some local officials demand the quick removal of children from their families at the first sign of abuse, but others point out the terrible consequences in the past when children were placed in foster homes unable and unwilling to care for them.

There is much that could be done about these conditions. Caseloads for child welfare workers could be drastically reduced, at-risk families could be provided with new programs to assist them, parents could be provided with decent jobs, free or low-cost child care, affordable housing and decent medical care, including mental health treatment, so that they raise healthy children. These and other steps, however, will not be taken except as the product of a mass political struggle of the working class against the wretched conditions that are the product of the profit system.



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