

Toddler suffers severe burns from Atlanta, Georgia police raid

Muhammad Khan
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A police raid on a home in Atlanta, Georgia early Wednesday morning has resulted in the serious injury of a 19-month-old child. Police entering the home threw a stun grenade that fell in the playpen of the sleeping child and exploded in his face.

A Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team barged into the home at 3:00 am looking for Wanis Thometheva, a suspected methamphetamine dealer and son of the homeowners. Thometheva was later arrested at another location.

While the suspect was not present, staying at the house was another family, related to the homeowners, who had been forced from their home in Wisconsin after it was burned down. They were not aware of and had no relationship to Thometheva's activities or prior charges.

"Some cops busted in the door and threw that grenade in there without even looking first," said Alecia Phonesavanh, the mother of the child, who was asleep at the time. "And it land[ed] right in his playpen and exploded on his pillow right in his face." Images show the severe injuries to the child's face and the damage to the playpen he was sleeping in.

The child, Bounkham "Bou Bou" Phonesavanh, is currently being treated for his burns and has been given a 50 percent chance of survival. He is being kept in a medically induced coma and is currently paralyzed.

"He's in the burn unit. We go up to see him and his whole face is ripped open," Phonesavanh stated. "He has a big cut on his chest." Because the child's family has no health insurance they have had to set up a fund to collect money for his medical expenses.

The sheriff of Habersham County has claimed that police involved in the raid had no indication a family with four children was visiting.

"They say there were no toys," Alecia said. "There is

plenty of stuff. Their shoes were laying all over." She also said that the family's van was parked out front with all of their belongings inside. There were stickers on the car and car seats within the car, which would have indicated the presence of children in the home.

The sheriff claimed that neither the SWAT team nor informants for the police noticed the vehicle. None of the officers involved have been suspended from duty.

The raid on the home, and the manner in which it was conducted, is part of a broader trend throughout the United States. The use of no-knock warrants, in which police are allowed to enter a property without immediate prior notification of residents, has increased enormously. Police carried out 50,000 such raids in 2005, up from 3,000 in 1981. Kade Crockford of the ACLU estimates that between 70,000 and 80,000 no-knock raids now occur every year.

The number of deaths in such raids has increased over time, including at least 40 between 1981 and 2005. There have been several instances in which people who thought they were being robbed pulled a gun for their defense and were shot and killed by the police.

The use of stun grenades has also caused deaths and serious injury, despite claims that they are "nonlethal." In 2003, Alberta Spruill died from a heart attack after police detonated a stun grenade in a mistaken raid on her home in Harlem, New York. On other occasions people have died from smoke inhalation after the buildings they were in caught fire from stun grenade explosions.

In May 2010, on the east side of Detroit, a no-knock raid was conducted by police that resulted in the death of 7-year-old Aiyana Stanley-Jones. Police began the raid by firing a stun grenade through the window and proceeded to fire shots, one of which penetrated Aiyana's head and neck, killing her.

Radley Balko, author of *Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America's Police Forces* posted a blog entry in the *Washington Post* on the Georgia raid in which he reviewed a long list of victims killed or maimed by police raids involving flash grenades.

The use of SWAT teams—essentially heavily armed paramilitary police units—has also proliferated, in lock step with the growth of social inequality. Almost every city in the country now employs such outfits, which specialize in the use of military-style equipment and tactics like those used against the Phonsavanh family.



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